WILLIAM VAUGHAN

Romanticism and Art

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THAMES AND HUDSON

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For Pek

Preface

The undertaking of this book was motivated by the somewhat outmoded conviction that the term 'Romantic' has a positive meaning for the art of the early nineteenth century. It is a conviction that has grown in the writing.

Much of the opening and concluding chapters has been given over to a consideration of the uses of the word during the period. At times this has led to citations of unpublished or little-known sources, and where this is the case I have included references in the chapter bibliographies. As this book is intended as an introductory characterization, however, it did not seem appropriate to garnish it with notes.

Like most writers on Romanticism I have adopted the convention of spelling the word Romantic with a capital 'R' when referring to the movement or specific theories, and a small 'r' when using it in a more general sense.

My principal debts to published works are recorded in the bibliography. I owe more than I can remember to Anita Brookner and Michael Kitson (my ever-patient supervisor), both of whom kindled my enthusiasm for the period when I was a student. I am also greatly indebted to Anita Brookner – as to David Bindman – for reading this book in manuscript form and being so generous with their help and advice. They have saved me from many follies – though not that of my own opinions. Among the many others who have stimulated and encouraged me in conversation are David Freedberg, John Gage, Timothy Hilton, Alexander Potts and Helen Weston. Like most teachers, I have found the help of my students invaluable.

It would be comforting to conclude like Montaigne that, since my memory is appalling, all my ideas must be my own; but alas I cannot. Too often, I am sure, I have presented other people's thoughts and observations as though they were mine. For all such plagiarisms I apologize.

W. V.

1 ANON. *The Romantic* 1825

Attitudes and ambiguities

The movement and the word

Whatever else is said about the Romantic movement, no one can deny that it really did happen. There really was a time in the early nineteenth century when to be a Romantic meant more than to be a dreamer or a love-sick youth; when an artist could accept the name with pride and take it to imply, as the writers Stendhal and Baudelaire did, that he was courageously facing the realities of his age.

While the significance of the word can be endlessly debated, the history of its use is not in doubt. The first writers and artists to become known as 'Romantics' were those associated with the German critics, the brothers August Wilhelm and Friedrich Schlegel, in Dresden at the end of the eighteenth century. Friedrich Schlegel himself provided the earliest definition of Romantic poetry – 'progressive universal poetry' as he called it – in their magazine *Athenaeum* in 1798. The name stuck and soon spread throughout Germany to describe all those who, like the Schlegels, believed the modern world to be spiritually incompatible with that of classical antiquity. A decade or so later this meaning of the word was exported by the French *littératrice* Madame de Staël, when her review of contemporary German culture, *De L'Allemagne*, was published in 1813. It was she who, as one commentator was to remark a year later in the *Quarterly Review*, 'made the British public familiar with the habit of distinguishing the productions of antiquity by the appellation *classic*, those of modern times by that of *romantic*'. And it was this habit that generated so much controversy throughout Europe over the next four decades and then seemed to become irrelevant.

Like most uncontroversial statements, this history does not tell us much. It certainly does not tell us why the name was adopted.

It would be easy to follow the author of plate one, and to suggest the whole business amounted to no more than a fad – a fashionable pretext for eccentrics and idlers to indulge their proclivities. Yet a word does not generate controversies – certainly not ones that rage over half a century – unless it seems to touch upon some fundamental issues. As the French poet

Charles Baudelaire put it in his Salon review of 1846: 'Few people today will want to give a real and positive meaning to this word; and yet will they dare assert that a whole generation would agree to join a battle lasting several years for the sake of a flag which was not also a symbol?'

Baudelaire was writing at a time when the word had become devalued through over-use. Yet even before this, its precise worth had never been certain. Many of the most famous artists of the period whom we now think of as 'Romantics' were actually opposed to the notion. Eugene Delacroix, for example, rejected it. He was, he declared, a *pur classique*. This pattern could be repeated throughout the arts. In literature, for example, the English poet Byron, the proverbial romantic in the waywardness of his life, considered the debate to be of no importance: while the German poet Goethe, the author of those two paradigms for the Romantics, *Werther* and *Faust*, denounced the movement as a disease.

Indeed, if one were to restrict the name to those who themselves adopted it, one would be left with a meagre and largely undistinguished assortment. In the visual arts it would amount to little more than a group of minor German painters active around 1800, and the lesser followers of Géricault and Delacroix in France after the end of the Napoleonic wars in 1815. A list of artists who were from time to time known as 'Romantics' by their contemporaries would certainly be more prestigious, and would include a majority of the leading painters working in the period 1800–50 – notably Goya, Géricault, Delacroix, Turner, Blake, Runge and Friedrich. Yet it would still leave out many, such as Constable, who now seem to us also to have been affected by the movement.

Part of the trouble lies in the difficulty of deciding whether to look upon Romanticism as an explicit movement or as a symptom of the times. Nor is this dilemma a modern fabrication, for it was in this period that this kind of question first arose with the claim that dominated cultural history for so long, that, as the poet P. B. Shelley put it in *A Defence of Poetry* (1821), artists reveal in their productions 'less their spirit than the spirit of the age'.

A 'spirit of the age' is proverbially elusive, and little would be gained here from attempting to define one for the early nineteenth century. Yet one cannot get far in the appreciation of any work of art without considering the concerns that lay behind it, the preoccupations of the artist when creating it, and the expectations it was intended to fulfil. The essential point here is that the word 'Romantic' was used by certain contemporaries in an attempt to isolate the central concerns of the day: their designation was sufficiently telling to provoke prolonged discussion and reaction. It is this debate that forms the starting-point for this book. Since the course that this took is so varied it seems best to link it with an historical account of the art it

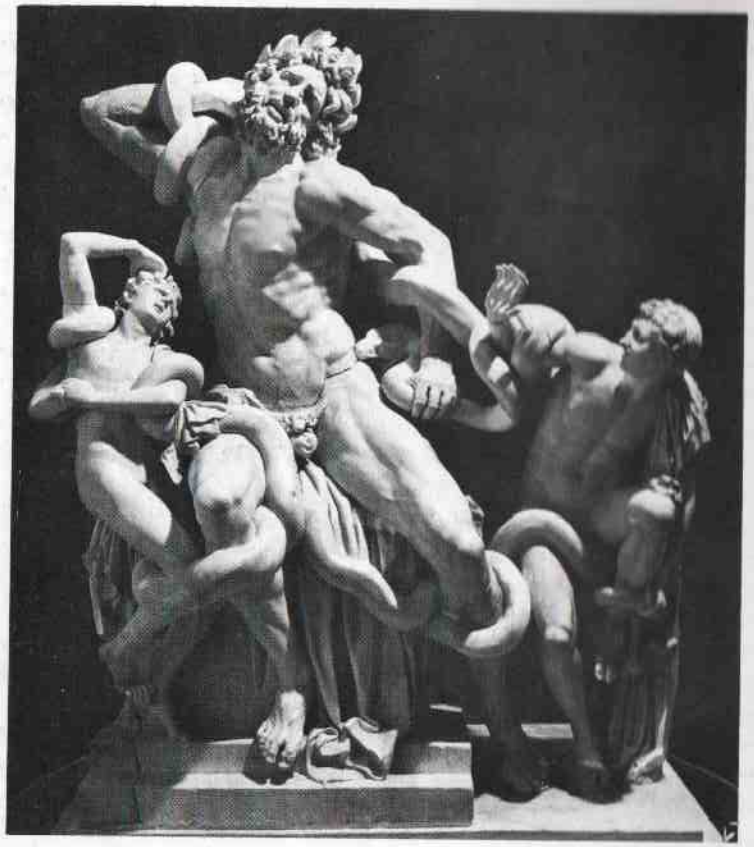
involved, and to save more general conclusions to the last chapter. Two fundamental issues, however, can profitably be mentioned here. The first – which will be discussed in the succeeding section of this chapter – concerns pictorial method, the extent to which Romanticism can be identified with stylistic as well as thematic tendencies. The second – which will be considered in the concluding section of this chapter – concerns the Romantic claim, that fateful assumption of universal relevance which Shelley made in the passage cited above, and which involved artists in such ambivalent relationships with the political and social upheavals of the time.

Towards a Romantic style

Baudelaire's defence of Romanticism in 1846, that was mentioned above, was more than a statement of belief. For he not only claimed the word stood for a real issue, but also hinted, through the image of a 'flag' which was also a 'symbol', at the mode of expression it represented. For above all, the Romantics were interested in an art of association. When A. W. Schlegel, inspired by contemporary metaphysics, called beauty 'a symbolical representation of the infinite' in the lectures on aesthetics that he gave in Berlin in 1801–2, he was indicating a special way of responding to a work of art, finding in its appeal the suggestion of a deeper and otherwise unknowable reality behind what can be perceived.

Since such ideas are concerned largely with interpretation, it is often felt that Romanticism is no more than an attitude of mind. It is certainly true that one cannot catalogue a Romantic style by means of an inventory of features, for the sense of a heightened reality can be felt as much in the dramatic bravura of a Delacroix like *Liberty Leading the People* as in the intense 12
precision of a Caspar David Friedrich like the *Arctic Shipwreck*. But nor can 108
one look upon Romantic art as the mere illustration of a set of ideas (an attitude that has often led Romanticism to be seen as 'unpictorial', something that has its place, no doubt, in literature but could only lead to a confusion of values in the visual arts). If a poem can indissolubly link a feeling and a rhythm of sounds, then a picture can also encompass the duality of imagery and form. And the way in which the former is suggested by the latter is a purely pictorial affair.

In this stylistic context the term 'romantic' can assume a role that still has a meaning for us today: as the opposite of the term 'classical'. While 'romantic' can be seen as describing the work of art that emphasizes the associative side of picture-making, 'classical' can be taken to describe the work that dwells on formal values. This was the distinction adopted by the Schlegels who,



2 ANON. *Laocoön* 2nd–1st c. BC

with predictable partisanship, associated 'romantic' with the spiritually inspired art of Christianity, and 'classical' with the pagan and, to them, physically orientated art of antiquity. They were in fact the first people explicitly to make this association: but in doing so they were joining a debate which had begun before them.

This debate began in the middle of the eighteenth century at the time of the revival of interest in classical art. The placid statues of ancient Greece seemed to be the embodiment of ideal beauty. The most influential art critic of the day, Johann Joachim Winckelmann described them as possessing 'calm

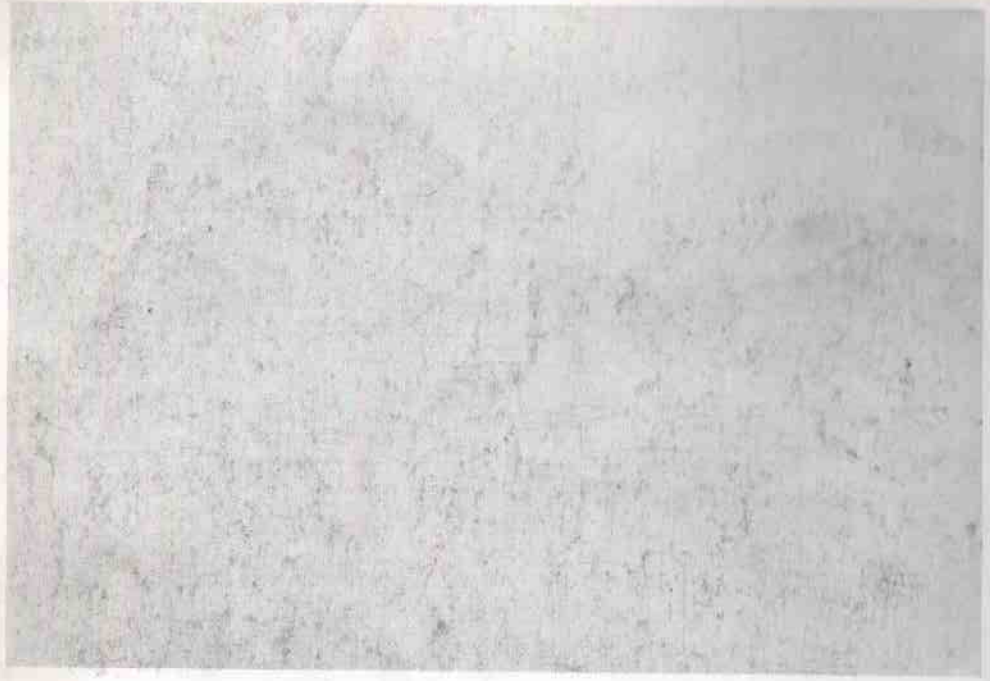
grandeur and noble simplicity'. Yet the question arose as to whether an art of such visual perfection could be used to express the full range of human passions and thoughts. Winckelmann himself thought that they could – or rather, that they could be intimated. For classical beauty at its height involved for him a stoic concealment of the deeper emotions. He cited as an example of this – rather improbably – the example of the late classical sculptural group that showed Laocoön and his sons being crushed by serpents. Winckelmann claimed that the expression on Laocoön's face showed heroic restraint, a mastery of the agony he must be feeling. Other critics felt differently. The most notable of these was Gottfried Ephraim Lessing, who wrote his treatise *Laokoon* (1766) in answer to Winckelmann's claim. Lessing argued that the visual arts could never express emotions properly since this interfered with their principal function of displaying pure beauty. He contrasted the visual arts in this respect to poetry, where the full range of emotions could be described without interfering with the purity of metre.

The opinions of these theorists – neither of whom, incidentally, had seen a major Greek sculpture when they were writing about *Laocoön* – might have been of limited value to artists had it not been for the effect they had on informed taste and educational practice. As it was, no aspirant could pass through the art academies of the day without hearing of the calm repose of beauty in its pure state. Thus the students of the London Royal Academy in 1772 could hear their President, Sir Joshua Reynolds, warn them in his Fifth Discourse: 'If you mean to preserve the most perfect beauty in *its most perfect state*, you cannot express the passions, all of which produce distortion and deformity, more or less, in the most beautiful faces.'

He added, for those who felt depressed by such a restriction of their powers: 'We need not be mortified or discouraged at not being able to execute the conceptions of a romantic imagination. Art has its boundaries, though imagination has none.'

In using the word 'romantic' to defend the free expression of imagination and association in the arts, therefore, the Schlegels had chosen their name with care. They had taken a term that had already come to mean for academic theorists and the admirers of classical art those emotive extremes that lay beyond the proper sphere of the artist to depict.

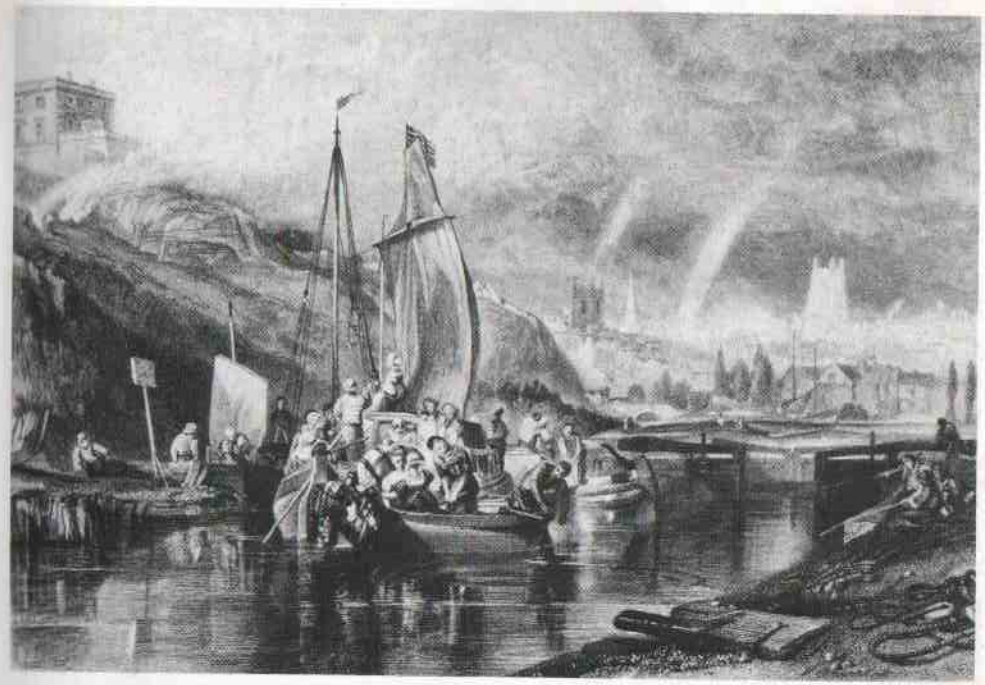
The word 'romantic', in fact, derived precisely from the kind of poetry that was felt to display such irregularities, the chivalric romances of the Middle Ages. Since the Renaissance the word had come to mean, as it did for Reynolds in the quotation above, all that was wild and fantastic, 'that imagination which is most free', as one early commentator, the philosopher Henry More, had expressed it in 1659.



3 TURNER *Heidelberg Seen from the Opposite Bank of the Neckar* 1844

In the pictorial sphere the word had evolved from this to describe sights that excited the imagination and led to reverie. When touring the English Midlands in 1794, the young J.M.W. Turner noted in his sketchbook that
4 Nottingham Castle was 'romantic situated'. It is hard to divine what he meant by this from the later view he designed of Nottingham for his *Picturesque England*; for the castle is hardly situated here at all. Its squat form is cut off by the upper left edge of the picture, and one is left to conclude that in fact the *only* thing that Turner found romantic about it was its situation, the way it rose steeply above the surrounding town. However, Turner drew many other castles, and some of these combined the scenic advantages of
3 Nottingham with greater inherent qualities. One such was Heidelberg, whose romantic properties had been noted by the philosopher Friedrich von Schelling during a visit in 1796: 'The castle hovers above the town and dominates it completely, increasing the romanticness of this moment. In the background, the ruins, resting in the dusky twilight.'

Ancient castles were only one kind of image to be noted for this kind of evocative quality. One could quote such examples as the 'romantic' branches



4 TURNER *Nottingham Castle* 1838

of a giant oak, 'grotesque and romantic' waterfalls or 'wild and romantic' mountains. Our own understanding of the word is similar enough for us to imagine in most cases what was meant in the eighteenth century when reference was made to a 'romantic' scene. Only occasionally does the designation seem curious, as in the title of a picture exhibited by Sir Francis Bourgeois at the Royal Academy in 1792 – *Romantic Scene with Goats*.

'Romantic art' – as opposed to the depiction of romantic scenes – began in a quite literal sense. The first painters actually to be described as working 'in a romantic style' were the Germans Franz and Johannes Riepenhausen. They were called such by the painter Franz August Klinkowström when writing to his friend Philipp Otto Runge on 27 June 1804. Artists of – to put it kindly – indifferent talent, the Riepenhausens gained their epithet through their adoption of the medievalizing subject-matter, the 'romances', favoured by the Schlegel circle in Dresden. It may seem curious that the works described by Klinkowström as being 'in a romantic style' – a series of scenes from the poet Ludwig Tieck's *Life and Death of St Genevieve* which were subsequently 6
engraved in 1806 – should have been drawings in outline. For this sparse

5 FLAXMAN *Close to her Head the Pleasing Vision Stands* 1793

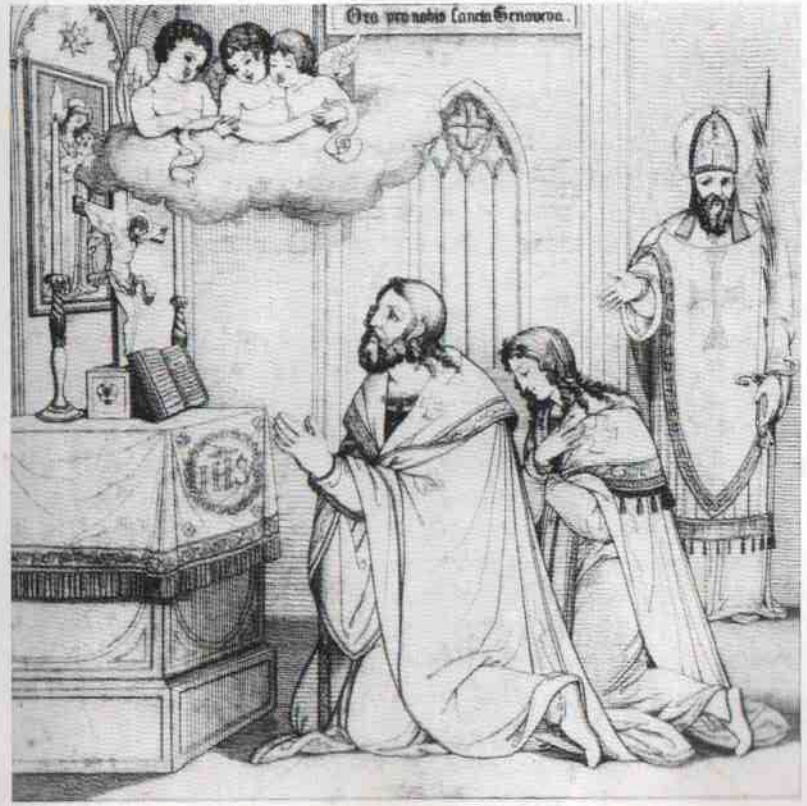
technique is normally associated with classical values. It was certainly used by the Neo-classicists of the late eighteenth century as a means of grasping the essence of form. This can be seen in the most famous outline drawings of the period, the illustrations of scenes from Dante and Homer by the English
5 sculptor John Flaxman which circulated, in their engraved form, throughout Europe.

However, by the time the Riepenhausens came to design their outlines the method had been interpreted in a different light by their Romantic mentors. For when A. W. Schlegel reviewed Flaxman's outlines in his magazine *Athenaeum* in 1798, he dwelt not upon their formal succinctness but upon their evocative potential. Outline seemed to him the pictorial method that came closest to the allusive manner of poetry, since its sketch-like quality 'incited the imagination to complete' the details of the scene. Flaxman himself held firm to the classical notion of outline. As his friend Crabb Robinson noted in his diary, the sculptor disparaged Schlegel's appraisal of his work and felt that German artists had misunderstood its method completely. Flaxman claimed he reduced the details in his scenes so that these

should not obscure the purity of the design. This is certainly borne out by his designs. As in an antique frieze, his heroes pose in a vacuous world, a timeless pattern of rhythms and arabesques. The Riepenhausens, on the other hand, use the schematic style for a truly Schlegelian evocation. The altar, religious trappings and architectural details in this scene are hinted at with as many clues as are the principal figures. The artists are intent upon stimulating the imagination with a sense of historic atmosphere – with the religious devotion of the Middle Ages.

Although one cannot talk of a Romantic style, therefore, it can be seen that the notion of Romanticism, wherever it encountered the visual arts, did involve pictorial changes. The modifications that romantic attitudes brought about in outline drawing were to be matched and emphasized in many different art forms in the decades to come.

6 FRANZ AND JOHANNES RIEPENHAUSEN From *Life and Death of St Genevieve* 1806



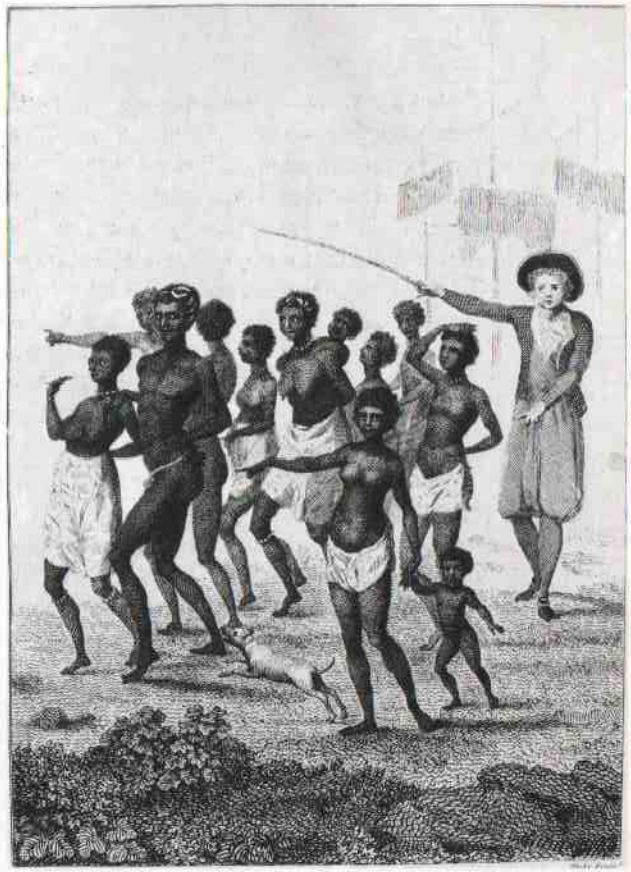
In striving to express the ideal in terms of the real, the Romantic experienced both the exhilaration of acting as a prophet and the depression of coming to terms with everyday experience. And this accentuated an ambiguity in the artist's position; for while he had elected to be the spokesman for the 'spirit of the age', it was not clear whether he should do this by addressing his contemporaries or simply by recording them. If Shelley could triumphantly affirm in *A Defence of Poetry* (1821) that poets 'are the unacknowledged legislators of the world', the French novelist Charles Nodier could formulate, in *Mélanges de littérature et de critique* (1820), the passive side of the situation: '. . . romantic poetry springs from our agony and despair. This is not a fault in our art but a necessary consequence of the advances made by our progressive society.'

In both cases, however, there was a determination not to avoid the problems of the day. Nodier's ironic reference to 'our progressive society' reflected a bad conscience that had been growing in Europe since the middle of the eighteenth century. For it was at this time that the accelerating material progress in Western Europe led to the first serious doubts about the mores of civilized society.

No one had set himself up more successfully as the spokesman for these doubts in the eighteenth century than Jean-Jacques Rousseau. The true ancestor of Shelley's legislators, this thinker had inflamed Europe through his imagination; through his vision of a primeval liberated society in which all restricting conventions, even the ownership of property, were unknown. His *Social Contract* (1762), which expounded the notion of a primitive agreement which the rich and powerful had distorted to their advantage, provided with its stirring opening sentence, 'Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains', one of the creeds for the French Revolution of 1789.

More important still was Rousseau's appeal to the emotions; for he claimed that human reason, when not accompanied by considerations of the heart, could act only in a way that was unproductive because insensitive. This doctrine was to cause the outburst of much irresponsible 'sentiment' among the fashionable; but it was also to provide a stimulus towards a timely humanitarianism. It was through following the dictates of his heart, for example, that the great reformer William Wilberforce devoted a lifetime to bringing about the abolition of slavery in the British colonies.

The slave trade represented one of the most heartless encounters between Europe and the so-called 'primitive' societies in which its colonial interests were developing. At the same time as Rousseau was celebrating the harmonious existence of the uncorrupted 'Noble Savage', his fellow



7 BLAKE *Group of Negroes, as Imported to be Sold for Slaves* 1796

Europeans were brutalizing these same people and forcing them to work the plantations of the New World. Both the obvious inhumanity of this practice, and, perhaps, the convenient distance at which it took place, made it one of the most unequivocal indictments of contemporary society for the liberals and humanitarians of the period. First-hand accounts of conditions in the colonies aroused great interest. Some, particularly those that emphasized the beauty and natural dignity of the slaves, became best sellers. One such was Captain Stedman's *Narrative of a Five Years' Expedition against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam, in Guiana* (1796). It was appropriate that Stedman's friend William Blake should have been engaged, in his capacity as a commercial engraver, to provide some of the plates for this book. For Blake was an artist whose deep concern with enslavement on both a personal and a political level is made clear in his contemporary 'prophetic' books. It

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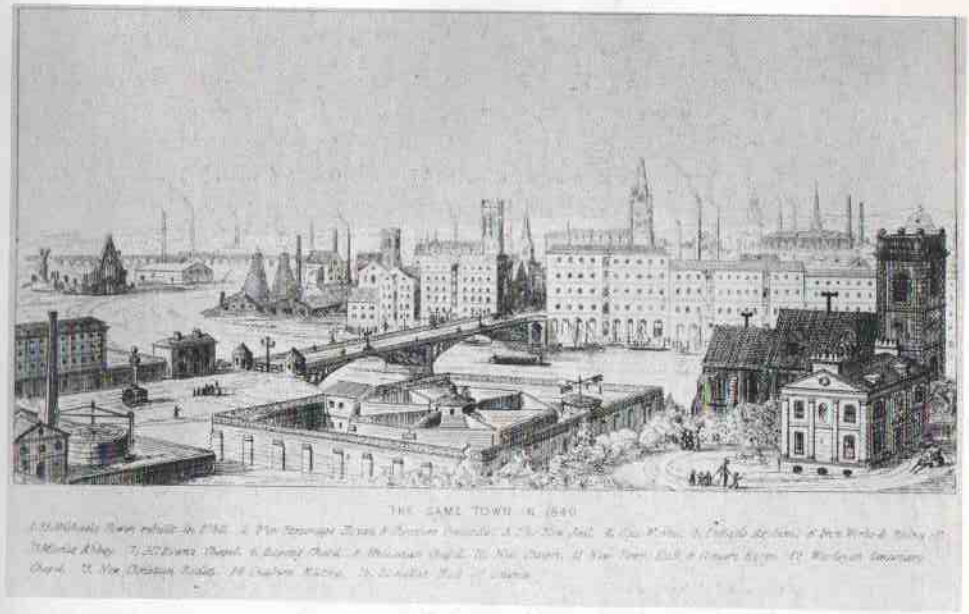
can be no accident that his engraving of Negroes on their way to be sold should show many of the unfortunates in graceful classical postures.

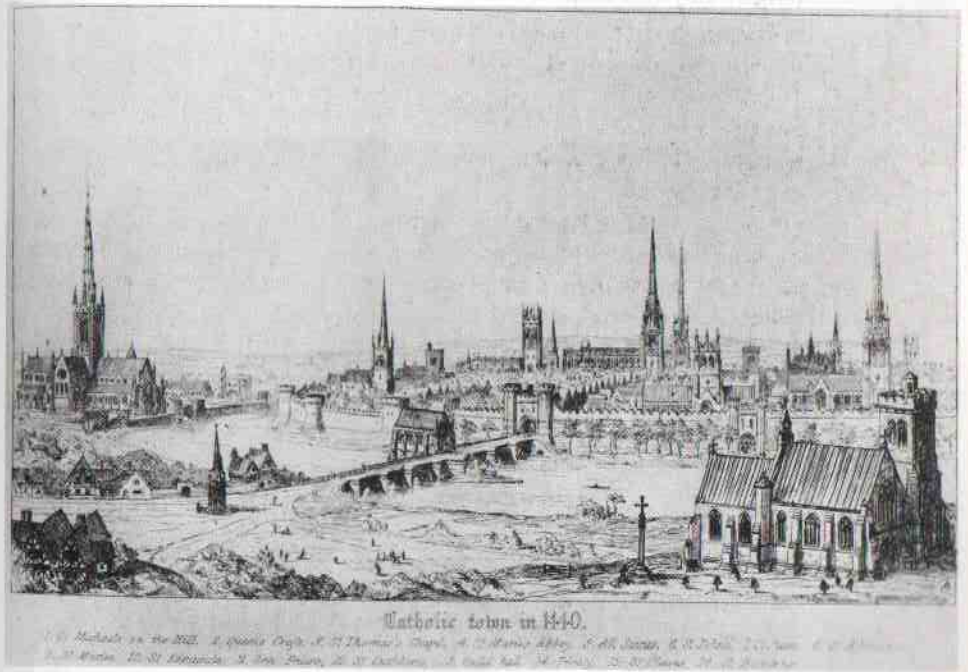
No less distressing were the changes that progress was causing within Europe itself. The rapid multiplication of industrial potential which began in the cotton mills and iron foundries of the north of England brought about its own form of bondage in the development of sprawling slums and in the social isolation of the poor from the rich. By the 1830s even the most protected members of polite society could hardly ignore these consequences. For not only had the voice of the urban and industrial poor made itself heard in the Revolutions of 1830, but technological improvements, such as the development of the railways after 1840, began to affect people's way of life at a domestic level. It was to such a society that the architect A. W. N. Pugin
8,9 addressed his polemical *Contrasts* (1836). In the second edition of this, the condition of a town in 1840 is compared to its state in the fifteenth century. Nor was this kind of criticism confined to the fanciful medievalist. It was equally appealing to the dour economist and historian Thomas Carlyle, who compared medieval and modern life, in his *Past and Present* of 1843, to point out the inequalities and spiritual poverty of the present age: 'We have more riches than any nation ever had before; we have less good of them than any nation ever had before.'

The ambivalent attitude of most observers, expressing admiration for the riches of imperialism and industrialization and horror at the human suffering that they had caused, was mirrored in the reactions of the artist. While Blake and Pugin uttered prophetic condemnations, others were overawed at the forces that had been released. Indeed, in the late eighteenth century, a whole new category of romantic imagery had emerged with the startling appearance of the industrial landscape. At times the two types of 'romantic' scenery, the idyllic and the dramatic, clashed as new factories encroached
10 upon the surrounding countryside, as in Coalbrookdale, in Shropshire, where blast furnaces emerged in a gently wooded valley. The local poetess Anna Seward, the 'Swan of Lichfield', lamented the despoiling of her favoured 'soft, romantic, consecrated scenes' by these intruders from the underworld; yet when the landscape painter Philip James de Loutherbourg visited the area to make drawings for his *Romantic and Picturesque Scenery of England and Wales* (1805) it was the intruders who monopolized his attention. The site was described in the text of the book as 'worthy of a visit from the admirer of romantic scenery no less than from the political economist', and Loutherbourg, who specialized in the dramatic, returned to the subject to create one of his most powerful oil paintings.

Equally telling were the artists' reactions to the political upheavals that followed on the Revolution in France of 1789. The libertarian outbursts of

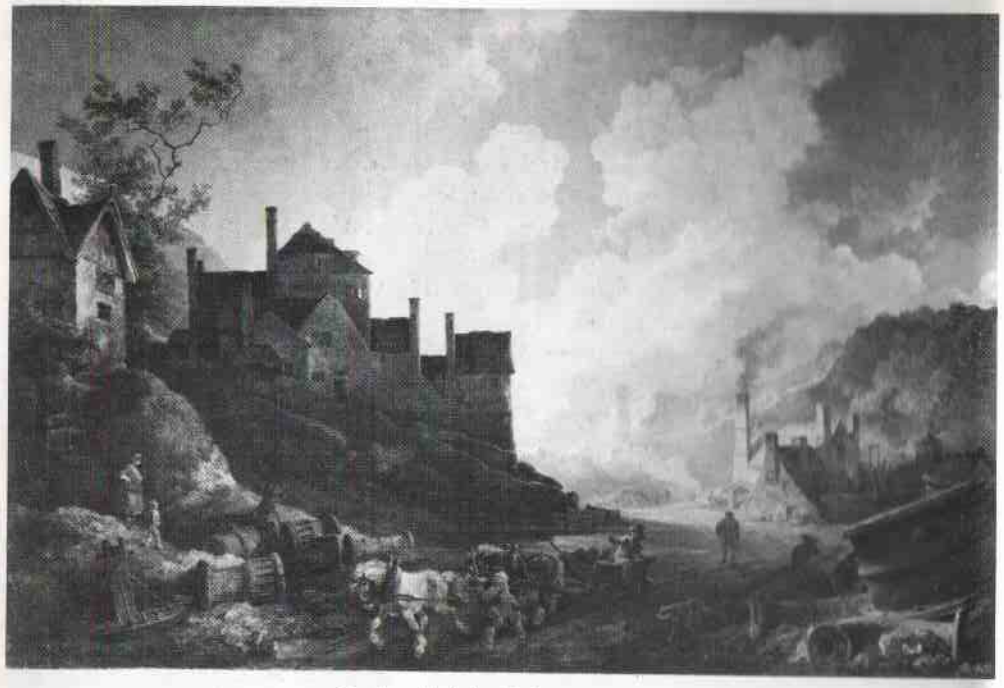


THE SAME TOWN in 1840.



Catholic town in 1440.

8, 9 PUGIN *Contrasts* 1840



10 LOUTHERBOURG *Coalbrookdale by Night* 1801

the 1790s were countered first with the authoritarianism of Napoleon and then with the restoration of reactionary governments following his defeat in 1815; but the impact of revolution could never be eradicated. An ideal of democracy persisted through the nationalist movements in Greece, Italy, Germany and Eastern Europe and through innumerable local uprisings which culminated in the international Revolutions of 1830 and 1848. But these revolutionary movements were no longer conducted in the spirit of simple idealism that had marked those of the eighteenth century. The Revolutionaries of 1789 had been inspired by Rousseau's vision of the essential goodness of man. They believed that if the old constraints were removed, then human nature would be able to flower in all its glory. The events of the 1790s – such as the reign of terror that swept through France when the Jacobins were in power – destroyed for ever the plausibility of such naïve beliefs. The Romantics looked back to the period of idealism prior to this with what Baudelaire termed a 'sense of irreparable loss'. For those who believed, like Keats, in the 'holiness of the heart's affections', there was a persisting sense of disillusion at the course of contemporary events. Perhaps

this is why the Romantics so rarely spoke a clear political language. For they were suspicious of the rhetoric of propaganda with its dishonest insinuation that it was promoting a means for perfecting mankind. Instead of supporting such claims, the most profound artists focussed on the human victims of idealism. When French troops occupied Spain during the Napoleonic wars, the Spanish painter Goya recorded the atrocities committed with horrifying directness in the etchings *The Disasters of War*. He does not show his countrymen as heroes, but as victims, caught up in a fate they have no control over. After the war, artists affected by Romanticism tended to comment on political events with ironic distance. After the 1830 Revolution in France, Delacroix celebrated the successful insurrection with *Liberty Leading the People*. But there was enough of the mock-heroic about the victorious rabble he showed to seriously disturb the government of the day. It is not surprising that the revolutionaries of 1848 – so much more radical than those of 1830 – had little time for the emotive equivocations of the Romantics. They fought for a society organized on scientific principles, inspired by the prophets of economic prediction.

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No figure revealed the political ambivalences of Romanticism as completely as Napoleon. A classless man who climbed to be master of Europe, he was at the same time the product of the liberating forces of

11 GOYA *It Will Be the Same* from the *Disasters of War* c.1810

12 DELACROIX *Liberty Leading the People* 1830

13 GROS *Napoleon at Arcole* 1798

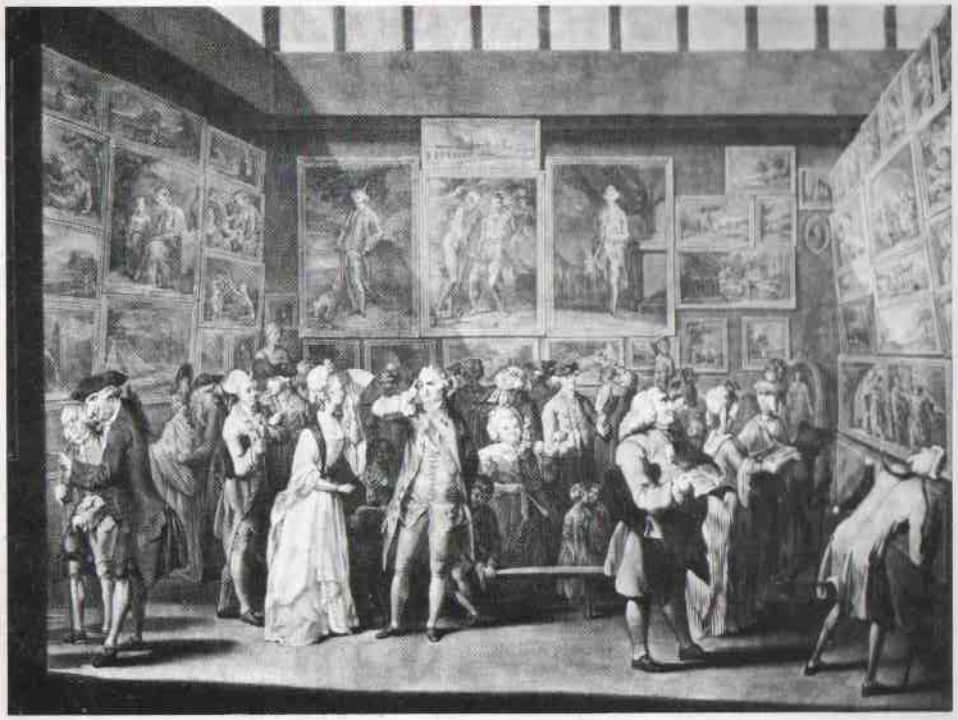
revolution and their downfall. During the years of his ascendancy many of the artists with liberal and republican sympathies who had formerly supported the French Revolution – like Blake, Wordsworth and Beethoven – were opposed to him. Those with similar sensibilities who adulated him –
13 like his principal propagandist painter Gros – did not depict him as a victor but as a man of emotion, anxious in mid-battle, compassionately visiting the
40 plague-stricken, or expressing horror at the consequences of war. It was not until after Napoleon's defeat that he became a fully Romantic hero, the martyred deity who presided over a myth of nostalgia until that too was defused later in the century in the unheroic outcome of the Second Empire.

Above all, the Romantics were determined never to let an idea or a theory submerge an emotion. And while no serious artist of the period denied the hard work, study and calculation involved in the creation of a work of art, they felt all this to be meaningless without the artist's inspiration. As the landscape painter Caspar David Friedrich said: 'The artist should not only paint what he sees before him, but also what he sees within him. If, however,

he sees nothing within him, then he should also omit to paint that which he sees before him.'

To preserve this inner inspiration the artist had to be prepared to run the risk of isolation, and this was certainly the price paid by Friedrich and Blake. But it was not always a matter of individual choice: artists in general were becoming isolated by social changes, by the growing anonymity of their audience. Private patronage did not cease in this period, but it certainly became a less significant outlet than the exhibition. The annual academy exhibition, which had become established throughout Europe by the late 14
eighteenth century, increased in importance as an artistic and fashionable event throughout the period. The extent of its authority by the mid nineteenth century can be gauged by the concern with which *avant-garde* artists, such as the Pre-Raphaelites and the Impressionists, viewed the possibility of exclusion.

On the whole, artists welcomed this change, for the new purchaser was a customer, who was expected to buy what was on offer, and pay the asking



14 BRANDOIN *Exhibition of Royal Academy Paintings* 1771

price. 'Liberality, we want not liberality,' wrote Blake, against a part of Reynolds' *Discourses* that seemed particularly toadying in its adulation of noble munificence – 'we want a fair price and proportionate value and general demand for art.'

Yet, although the 'general demand' was anonymous, it was not passive. A public audience had to be addressed in public terms, in terms of the events that were considered most important, the books that were most read, the plays that were most attended and the fantasies that were most familiar. And even if the artist was successful, he could no longer be sure what that success was, what use his work had been put to.

His fate might be that of the poet described in Kierkegaard's *Either/Or* (1843), who 'is like . . . the unfortunate victims whom the tyrant Phalans imprisoned in a brazen bull, and slowly tortured over a steady fire; their cries could not reach the tyrant's ears so as to strike terror into his heart; when they reached his ears they sounded like sweet music'. The artist who claimed to be the conscience of his time might be doing no more than providing it with entertainment. In an age of artistic ambiguities, this was perhaps the greatest.

Hope and fear

Rousseau's legacy

Every movement creates precursors. For one so wide-ranging as Romanticism they can be legion. Extremists like Friedrich Schlegel saw the whole of the post-classical world as Romantic, and commentators have found the necessary ingredients in virtually any artist who experienced frustration or expressed in his works a sense of longing or incompleteness. The exaltation of a Gothic cathedral, the struggles of Michelangelo, the reflectiveness of Rembrandt and even the ingenuity of the Greek painter Timanthes – in whose works, according to Pliny, 'more is suggested than is actually painted' – have all been seen as proto-Romantic.

These examples show the ubiquitousness of romantic attitudes; but they do little to explain the historic occurrence of the movement around 1800. For this, even close precedents can be deceptive. Thus the seventeenth-century cult of melancholy – evident in Milton's poem *Il Penseroso*, as in Jacob van Ruisdael's soulful depictions of his native heathlands – belongs to a different world: it is part of a Renaissance intellectual tradition, and while it encourages reflection, it is not transcendent. In Jacob van Ruisdael's *Jewish* 15
Cemetery we are made aware of mortal frailty; but there is no enigma. The keynote to the scene, the barren foreground tree, sets off a progression of images that culminate – in this version – in the rainbow, God's promise, behind the ruin. Formally, too, there are no surprises: the space is clearly defined, its recession calculated at every stage.

Only with the growth of that doubt that Rousseau exploited did such sentiments become more than a mode of expression and threaten to alter the structure of experience.

When he made emotion the guide to reason, Rousseau endowed it with a peculiar optimism. The image of a golden age, a state of innocence from which man had fallen, was hardly a novel one; yet no one had asserted before that this lost world could be rediscovered through the exploration of one's own natural predilections. Reflection led to liberation; and when the English editor of Rousseau's *Dialogues*, Sir Brooke Boothby, had himself portrayed 16
by Joseph Wright of Derby, the result was a new image of contemplation. For while Sir Brooke Boothby seems at first glance to show all the

traditional attributes of melancholy – stretched carelessly on a grassy bank by a stream, coat and waistcoat unbuttoned, book in hand, head supported by the right arm – there is no despair in his gestures. The book that he is holding – as the forefinger of his left hand indicates – is by Rousseau. It is almost as if he had been reading the passage in the *Confessions* where Rousseau speaks of the moment of revelation that inspired him to write his first work, the *Discourse on Inequality* (1750): 'Deep in the heart of the forest I sought and found the vision of those primeval ages whose history I bravely sketched.' Behind him, through the darkness of the woods, can be glimpsed an idyllic countryside; while a soft golden light pervades the scene.

However, Rousseau's legacy was a dual one. He believed in natural goodness and in the need to follow one's innate emotions; but what if the natural world were not fundamentally harmonious and beneficial? What if there were a darker side to nature? The followers of Rousseau had to make a

15 RUISDAEL *Jewish Cemetery c.*1670

16 WRIGHT OF DERBY *Sir Brooke Boothby* 1781

choice. Either they could strive towards the liberation of 'natural man', or they could explore the full range of their emotions – wherever that might lead.

This dualism found a parallel in the divergent tendencies in the art of the period 1750–90. On the one hand there was an optimistic and affirmative classical revival – in which Rousseau's sentimental adulation of the primitive was allied to a purified concept of ideal beauty. On the other there was an increasing curiosity about those more equivocal kinds of aesthetic experience for which the concept of beauty did not apply. It was in this context that the terms 'sublime' and 'picturesque' took on key importance. Even the word 'romantic' assumed a new significance. Indeed, if it had not been for the subsequent development of a theory of Romantic art the word might still be chiefly associated with a meditative form of late eighteenth-century sentiment. Ultimately this exploration of the darker side of experience – abetted by the science and pseudo-science of the day – was to develop expressive dimensions and a psychological awareness that lay beyond the reach of any system of classification.

Classicism and the primitive ideal

The association between classicism and 'natural sentiment' was already clearly stated in the work that was most influential in publicizing the revived interest in the antique, Winckelmann's *Thoughts on the Imitation of the Art of the Ancients in Painting and Sculpture* (1755). At the time when this book was published its author – a German scholar of humble origins – was on the point of settling in Rome. Here he was to become the leading authority on antique art, pioneering methods of research and analysis that have laid the basis of modern classical studies. In this early work, however, his main aim was not to present new evidence but to draw attention to himself, and this he did most successfully by allying the antique world with fashionable contemporary preoccupations.

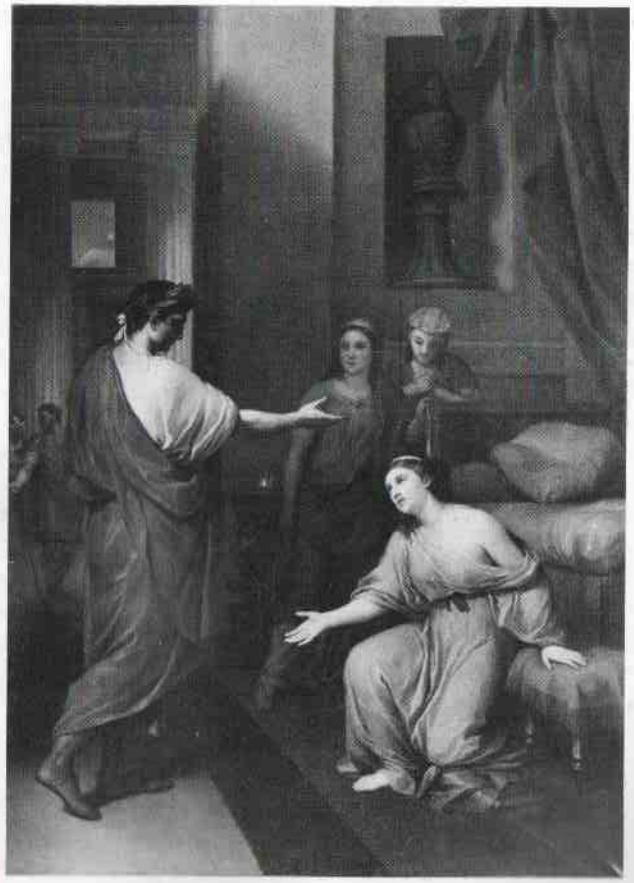
He began the polemic by suggesting that the supreme virtues of Greek art derived from the natural condition in which its creators lived. He even invoked the image of the contemporary 'noble savage' to demonstrate the physical perfection of the Greeks: 'Look at the swift Indian, as he hunts the stag on foot: how easily the blood courses through his veins; how supple and swift will be his nerves and muscles, how lithe his whole body! Thus Homer depicts his heroes.'

The fallen state of modern man was epitomized by his physical shortcomings, and it was only through the imitation of the 'noble simplicity and calm grandeur' of antique art that one could hope to recover the innate taste and ennobling sense of beauty of that lost world.

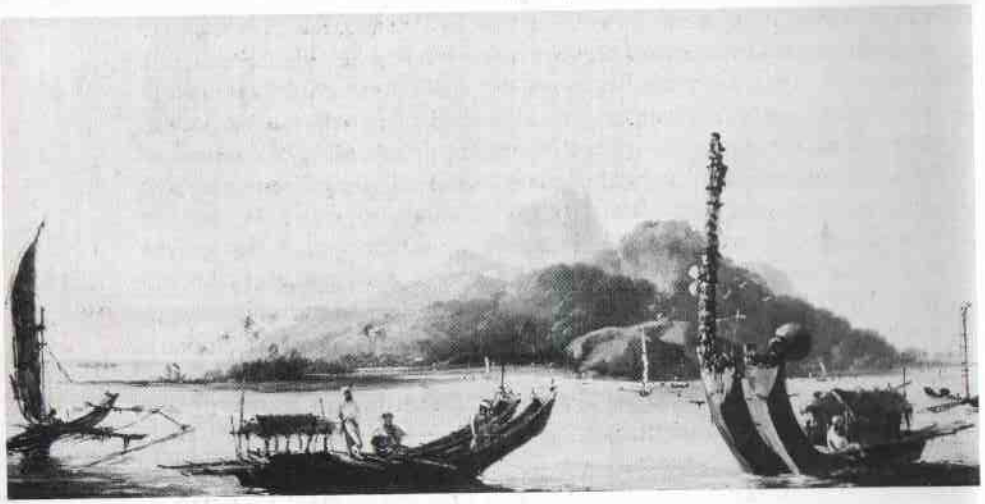
The emulation of the antique had never ceased since the Renaissance; but the artists who came under Winckelmann's spell in Rome in the 1760s displayed a new classicism of calculated simpleness that is sometimes charming and sometimes very dull. Winckelmann's principal familiar, the Dresden-born painter Anton Raphael Mengs (1728–79), is mainly remembered for the blandness of his ceiling fresco *Parnassus* (1761) in the Villa Albani in Rome; an innocuous pastiche of classical statuary and High Renaissance postures. Winckelmann declared that Raphael himself would have bowed before it, but if he had done, it would probably have been in embarrassment at the plagiarisms from his own fresco of the same subject in the Vatican. Yet even Mengs has a more appealing side, which can be seen in
17 his portraits and in such anecdotal compositions as *Cleopatra before Octavius*, where the Egyptian queen beguiles the Roman commander with an affecting humility, and a decorous display of feminine charms. Nor can this kind of work be characterized simply as a reworking of the compositions of such classicizing artists of the seventeenth century as Poussin. For not only is the design less complex than any of these, it is also more intimate. The softened forms of the figures are reminiscent of those in the Late Roman domestic

wall-paintings that were then being uncovered in Herculaneum and Pompeii; while their gestures and expressions show them to be creatures of sentiment.

If Neo-classical painters in Rome could be responsive to the nobility of the primeval times, the explorers who came into contact with actual primitive cultures could believe that they had rediscovered antiquity. Often members of tribes in the Americas and the South Sea islands were given such names as Agamemnon, Hercules and Aphrodite, despite their most un-Grecian appearance and behaviour. The lands they lived in were similarly idealized. When William Hodges (1744–97) accompanied Captain Cook on his second voyage to the South Seas in 1772 in the capacity of official landscape painter he recorded such startling new sights as boiling craters in the sea and exotic New Zealand mountains. Yet when he presented such sights to his contemporaries in his exhibition oil paintings they emerged couched in the language of the classical landscape. In his often repeated views of Tahiti the 18
palms and the striking mountains fade into the distance as though viewed



17 MENGS *Cleopatra before Octavius* 1760



18 HODGES *Tahiti* 1772

across the Roman Campagna. In the foreground the natives disport themselves in Arcadian ease.

The sentiment and idealism behind this Neo-classicism has often led to it being seen as yet another manifestation of Romanticism. Certainly it revealed an attitude to antiquity that could not have been dreamed up in any other age. Yet it remained distinguished by the un-Romantic, rationalistic, conviction that reason and natural sentiment lay in perfect alignment. Its idealism was one of a logical system of moral values. The natural descendants of the gently optimistic paintings of the 1760s in Rome are the heroic
38 canvases of David, where sentiment has become the servant of propaganda.

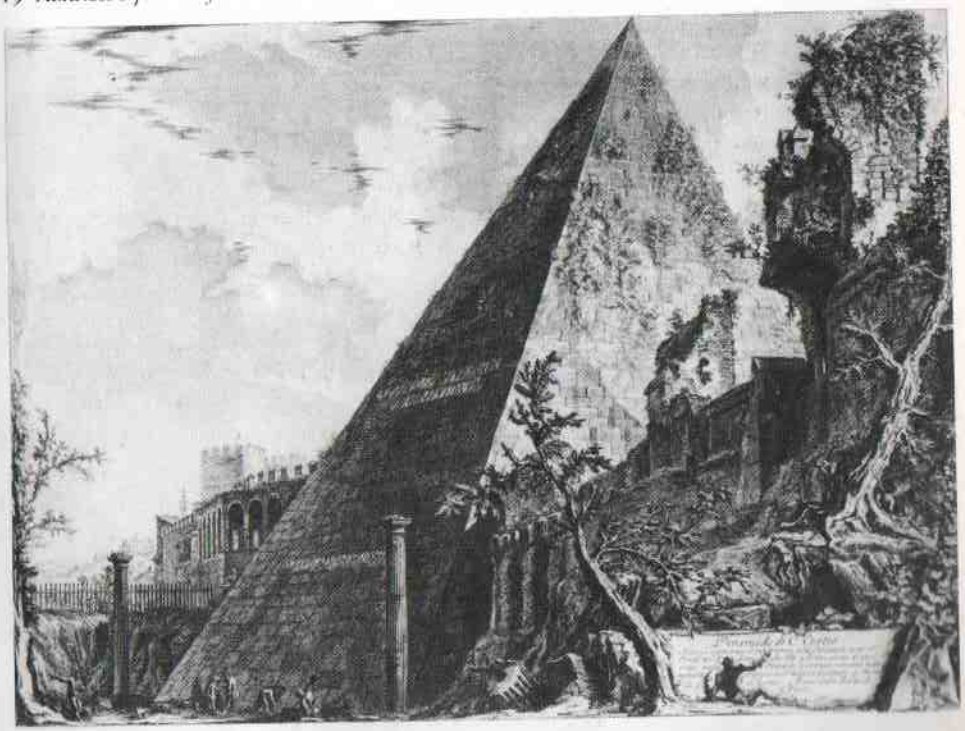
The Sublime

The momentous step of exploring the broad range of human emotion was taken, almost simultaneously with the publication of Winckelmann's first book, with the *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757) of the Anglo-Irish statesman Edmund Burke. Since the treatise of the late classical author Longinus it had been recognized that aesthetic pleasure could be stimulated not only by the awareness of beauty, but also by a more mysterious and elating experience known as the 'Sublime'. However, Longinus had considered the Sublime to be in effect an overpowering form of beauty, and associated it with the Neo-platonic belief which saw the ultimate perfection of earthly forms in Heaven, to suggest

that it provided the closest experience of the Divine. Burke's view, on the other hand, was less elevated. His approach was psychological, for he was concerned with the roots of emotion. He reasoned that man's two most powerful feelings were love and hate, expressed as attraction and repulsion. While a sense of beauty was aroused by those objects that seemed attractive, a sense of sublimity was induced by those objects whose properties seemed repellent, such as excessive size, darkness or infinite extension.

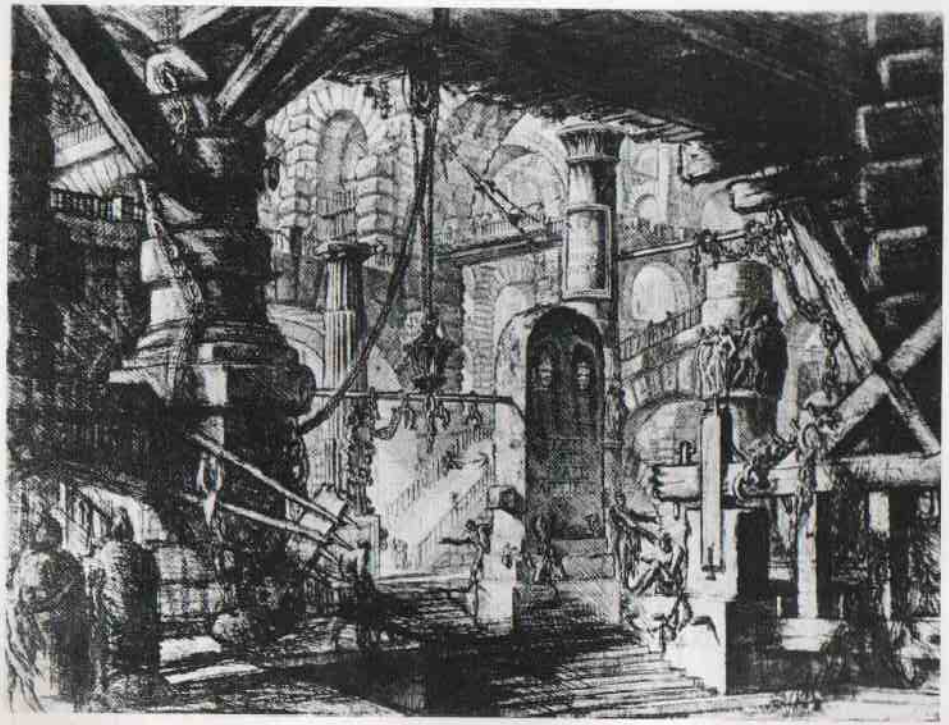
Burke's theory was vital to the Romantics both because it emphasized the suggestive quality of art and because it gave a new importance to the disturbing. The artist who concentrated on this now was not simply engineering a Baroque thrill; he had become an explorer. For Burke's notion of the Sublime emphasized that man was disconcerted primarily by that which lay beyond his control or comprehension. Ultimately repulsion could become a new means of intimating the Ideal which, for the Romantics, was always unknowable. Shelley, for example, declared that 'sorrow, terror, anguish, despair itself, are often the chosen expression of an approximation to the higher good'.

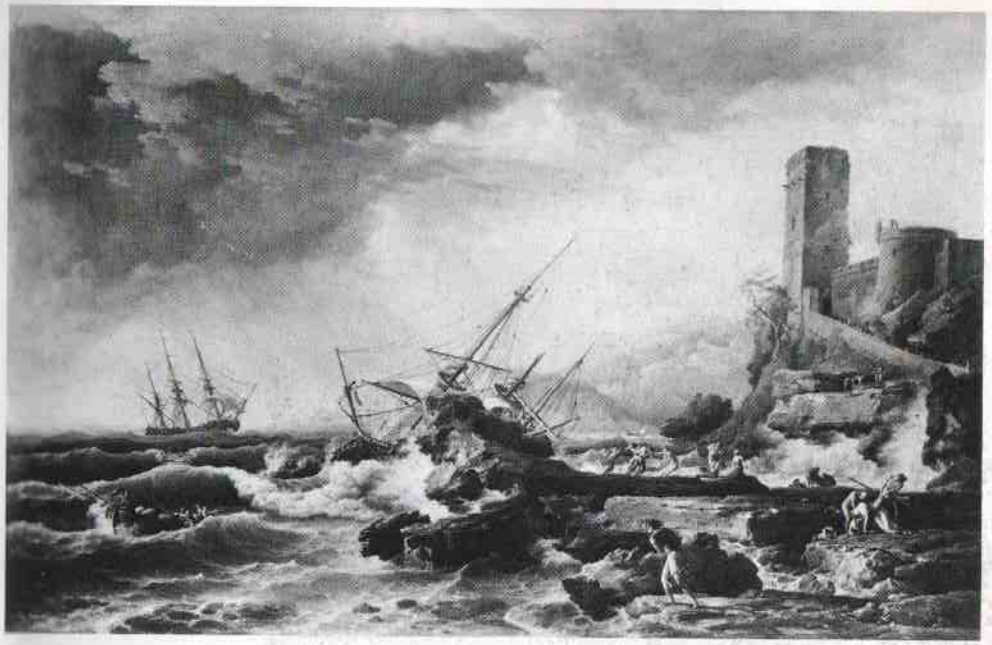
19 PIRANESI *Pyramid of Caius Cestius* 1748



20 ROBERT *Pont du Gard* 1786

21 PIRANESI *Carcere d'invenzione* 1745–61





22 CLAUDE VERNET *A Storm with a Shipwreck* 1754

Burke was himself a connoisseur and a friend of artists like James Barry. Yet while his enquiry includes an analysis of the pictorial manifestations of the Sublime, his conceptions here are limiting. Just as his image of beauty suggests no more than an insipid prettiness, so he sees sublimity essentially in terms of exaggeration and excess. In this he was following rather than leading the artists of his time. Rococo and Early Neo-classical art rarely surpasses the pretty, while the current masters of the frightening worked principally through distortions of shape, scale and lighting.

This was emphatically the case with Giovanni Battista Piranesi (1720–78), a Venetian-born architect and engraver who settled in Rome in 1740. From 1745 onwards Piranesi built up an international reputation for his *vedute*, engraved views of the monuments of Rome in which proportions are exaggerated to provide an overpowering sense of grandeur. In 1771 the English connoisseur Horace Walpole wrote of 'the sublime dreams of Piranesi, who seems to have conceived visions of Rome beyond what it boasted even in the meridian of its splendour'. Certainly the dramatic splendour of Roman antiquity was something that Piranesi wished to enhance. For he was utterly out of sympathy with Winckelmann and his

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notions of Grecian simplicity, and published tracts to defend his views. While Piranesi was most admired in his lifetime for his unique way of describing existing places, he is now most highly prized for his pure fantasies;
21 notably the *Carceri d'invenzione* (*c.* 1745–61), imaginary 'prisons' of immeasurable dimensions and startling contrasts in which his powers of suggestion were given full rein.

Burke certainly provided a vocabulary for describing such works, and this in itself may well have encouraged the development in the 1750s of a kind of landscape of excess. It was in this decade that the French artist Claude-Joseph Vernet (1714–89) turned to the production of pictures of natural disasters,
22 especially shipwrecks. And when the influential critic Diderot sought to characterize these in his Salon review of 1767, he did so in the language of Burke:

'The great landscapist has his own peculiar obsession; it is a kind of sacred horror. His caverns are deep and gloomy; precipitous rocks threaten the sky . . . man passes through the domain of demons and gods.'

What Vernet did for nature, the younger painter Hubert Robert
20 (1733–1808) did for ruins, with his depictions of French and classical scenes, which also gained the admiration of Diderot. And it was the French-trained artist Loutherbourg who finally brought this type of painting to the land in which this special meaning of the word 'Sublime' had been formulated, when he settled in London in 1771.

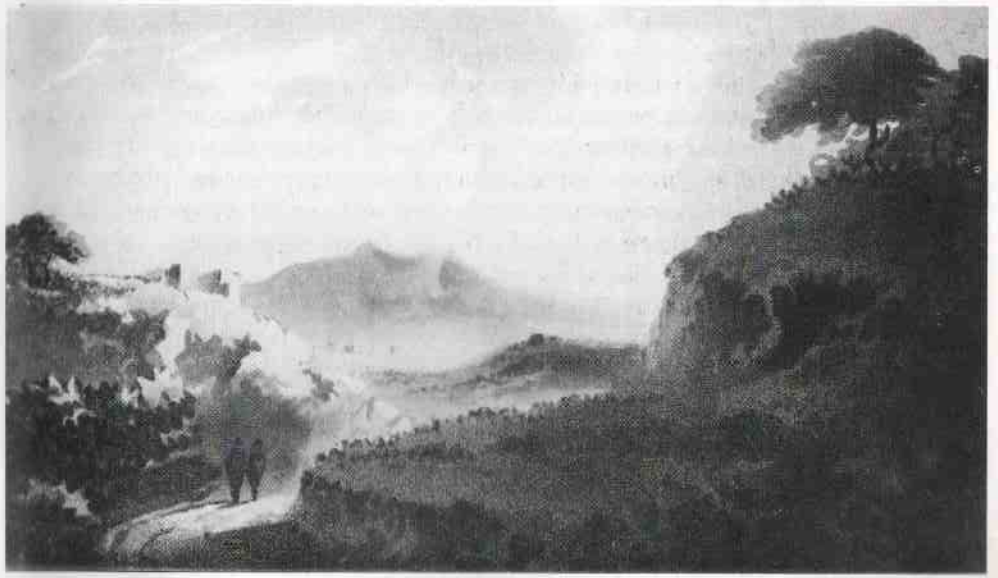
The Picturesque

Despite his concern with the sensational, Burke was no disciple of subjectivity. His actual enquiry began from the assumption that: 'It is probable that the standard both of reason and Taste is the same in all human creatures'; and his very admission of the two categories of the Sublime and the Beautiful had been an attempt to bring an undeniable opposition within the confines of one system. Eventually the assumption of a single and universal taste was to be broken down by the Romantics, but before this happened, the growing empirical recognition of a plethora of viewpoints had led to a proliferation of subdivisions and categories.

Perhaps the most influential revision was the one that led to the formulation of the category of the Picturesque. Burke himself had considered those emotions that depended upon mere 'interest', rather than love or hate, to be unworthy of aesthetic consideration; but there were those who devoted a lifetime to taking an interest in things, and they were inclined to disagree. For them the term 'Picturesque' – implying, as it did, 'worthy of a picture' – seemed suitable for that pleasurable area that lay between the Beautiful and the Sublime.

23 GILPIN *Non-Picturesque Mountain Landscape* 1792

24 GILPIN *Picturesque Mountain Landscape* 1792



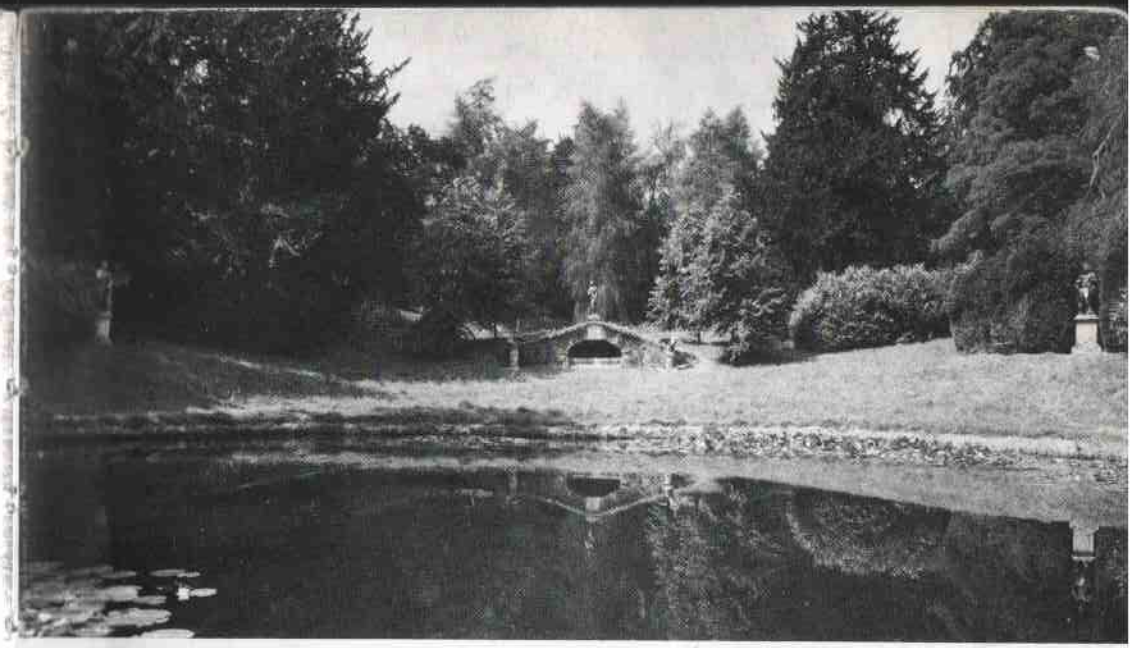
Appropriately enough, the principal champions of the Picturesque were rural clergymen and landed gentry with a taste for the arts. Its most vociferous exponent, William Gilpin, belonged to the former variety. In a lengthy series of books, starting with *Observations on the River Wye . . .* (1783), he explored the countryside of Britain in search of sites which could provide the kernel for a Picturesque experience. His proverbial remark, 'I am so attached to my picturesque rules that if nature gets wrong, I cannot help putting her right', aptly explains the lack of relationship between the compositions that Gilpin inserted in his volumes and what he actually saw on his travels. Indeed, the Picturesque was in Gilpin's hands so unrelated to any particular place that he could demonstrate its qualities abstractly in a pair of
23, 24 comparative plates in his *Three Essays . . .* of 1792. Here Gilpin opposes two designs in which 'the *great lines* of the landscape are exactly the same' in order to show that it is the principle of roughness that creates variety in a landscape and gives it picturesque interest.

Although there was a lot of bickering about what was and what was not picturesque, the sudden changes and textures caused by irregularity and variety were generally accepted as its touchstones. As another theorist, Uvedale Price, observed: 'The two opposite qualities of roughness and of sudden variation, joined to that of irregularity, are the most efficient causes of the picturesque.'

Curiously the formal characteristics of the Picturesque are, like those of Burke, concerned principally with line and chiaroscuro. The less definable area of colour lay outside even this theory. Furthermore, the Picturesque, while certainly drawing attention to a greater variety of scenes, had none of the associative implications of Burke's categories. It remained a formal principle, and the theorists were notoriously unconcerned with the individuality of any one place; their insensitivity to the life of the countryside, too, could be such that they were capable of such remarks as Uvedale Price's 'in our own species, objects merely picturesque are to be found among the wandering tribes of gypsies and beggars'.

It is from these theorists that further light can be cast on the use of the word 'romantic' to describe scenery at this time. For Gilpin, 'romantic' implies a type of scene too irregular even to be accepted as Picturesque. In his *Observations on the Highlands . . .* (1808) he found Edinburgh romantic rather than picturesque on account of the 'odd, misshapen and uncouth' feature of Arthur's Seat, adding: '. . . a view with such a staring feature in it, can no more be picturesque than a face with a bulbous nose can be beautiful'.

By this designation Gilpin was also saluting the degree to which 'the Romantic' (to cast it in the appropriate mould) was dependent upon associative qualities for its appeal. A younger and more speculative defender



25 KENT Rousham gardens *c.* 1740

of the Picturesque, Richard Payne Knight, attempted to annex this quality for the Picturesque; yet in Germany such clear-cut categories were already being swept away by more penetrating enquiries into the nature of aesthetic judgments. The unresolved relationship of the use of Romantic in this sense to the Picturesque survived in their vernacular usage, however, as can be seen in the numerous topographical works whose titles began with the coupling 'Romantic and Picturesque . . .', from Loutherbourg's *Romantic and* 10
Picturesque Scenery of England and Wales of 1805, to L. Schücking's *Picturesque and Romantic Westphalia* (*Das malerische und romantische Westphalen*) of 1839–41.

Landscapes of association

If such divisions can be found in the description of natural scenery, they were also used for works of art. In that activity in which taste and nature meet most directly, gardening, there was in the eighteenth century a gradual relaxation of methods. The garden is a place where man can modify nature to suggest the environment that he would most like to live in, and during this period the paradigm changed from the geometric formality of the seventeenth-century French garden – which had reached its apogee in the lay-outs of Le Nôtre at Versailles – to a relaxed and harmonious parkland; and then again to an evocative wilderness.

It was in England, once again, that this movement towards a freer nature began to take place. The precise origins of the 'landscape garden' are still contested but at the time it was thought that the man who – in Horace Walpole's phrase – first 'leaped the fence and saw that all nature was a garden' was William Kent (1685–1748). Having spent the second decade of the eighteenth century in Italy, he returned an indifferent architect and a poor painter. But he was full of the Arcadian ideal and this, at least, he could
25 enact for his patrons in their gardens. At Rousham in Oxfordshire, one can still see how he coaxed the English countryside into a Claudian composition.

The inspiration for the evocative garden seems to have come from a more exotic source: from the Chinese. Already in 1692 the keen gardener Sir William Temple, in his *Garden of Epicurus*, had contrasted the regularity of the European garden with the informality of the Chinese, who contrive figures 'where the beauty shall be great, and strike the eye, but without any order or disposition of parts'.

Quite where Temple got his knowledge of Chinese gardens, or found the curious word 'Sharawaggi' to describe them, is not known. But the story of the Chinese garden persisted, and was given an even greater impetus by the architect Sir William Chambers (1726–96) in his *Designs of Chinese Buildings, Furniture, Dresses, Machines and Utensils* of 1757. Chambers, later to erect the Pagoda in Kew Gardens, had at that time recently returned from nine years' travel in the Far East. Despite this, his account of the art and manners of the Orient is clearly based as much on imagination as on observation. The deception was a timely one, however, and greatly stimulated the idea of gardens that can be made to excite reverie. For in the section dealing with gardens Chambers dwells longest on those two types of gardens that, he claims, the Chinese call 'horrid and enchanted'. While his description of the 'horrid' seems to correspond most closely to the Sublime, with its 'impending rocks, dark caverns, and impetuous cataracts rushing down the mountains from all sides', the 'enchanted' corresponds, he tells us 'in a great measure to what we call romantic'; in this for example 'they make a rapid stream, or torrent, pass under ground, the turbulent noise of which strikes the ear of the newcomer, who is at a loss to know from whence it proceeds'.

In Chambers' mind there was a clear distinction between the horrid and the romantic, between the frightening and the mysterious. And it was the latter that was more appropriate to describe the rambling lay-outs of the wilder gardens that were to come. This is certainly the case with the most extreme of all such wildernesses, the random plantations arranged by William Beckford around his Gothic fantasia of Fonthill.

Turner was commissioned to paint a series of views of Fonthill by Beckford in 1799. It is not known whether the eccentric millionaire

26 TURNER *Fonthill c.* 1799

stipulated the way these should be handled; but Turner seems to have responded appropriately to the occasion. The jerry-built 'abbey' – as yet uncompleted, but already falling down – has been reduced to an immaterial 26
shimmer on the horizon, while the rambling grounds in which Beckford – 'ever the same romantic being' as he described himself to his friend the landscape painter Alexander Cozens – would roam in solitude, are shown in such a way as to make them almost undistinguishable from nature unadorned.

Alexander and John Robert Cozens, the two landscape painters who were most closely associated with Beckford, characterize the move towards a more sensitive and imaginative awareness of nature. The peripatetic Alexander Cozens (*c.* 1717–86), who began his life in Russia and arrived in Rome in 1746, was the most insistent of eighteenth-century landscape artists on the need for stimulation of the imagination in his art. An ingenious man who, in the words of Beckford, was 'almost as full of systems as the universe', he is best remembered for *A New Method of Assisting the Invention of Drawing Original Composition of Landscape* (1785). In this he declared that 'too much time is spent in copying the works of others, which tends to weaken the

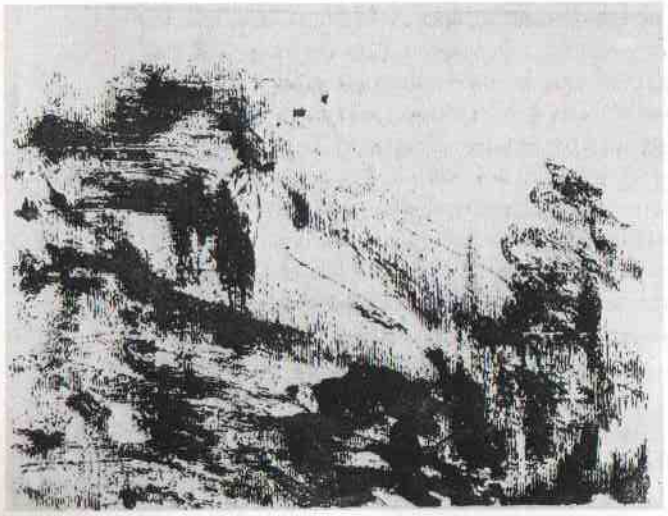
powers of invention, and I scruple not to affirm, that too much time may be spent in copying the landscapes of nature herself'.

These were brave words in a century in which nature and tradition were the guiding principles. Cozens' alternative was to allow a free range to the imagination by suggesting that compositions should be discovered in the
27 chance configurations of random ink marks. Such a suggestion provokes many interesting parallels; the recommendation by Leonardo to use accidental shapes on a wall to inspire landscape, or the spontaneous methods of the Zen landscape painters of the East. It even takes on a psychological dimension when compared to the Rorschach test. Yet Cozens was interested neither in spiritual revelation nor in an exploration of the subconscious. He is doing no more than suggesting a new path for an old journey. And, indeed, he ends his book by listing 'Descriptions of the Various kinds of Composition of Landscape' in which sixteen formulae are given. These are the schemata that his invention is to enliven. But they remain the system, and he prefaces them with some lines from Pope:

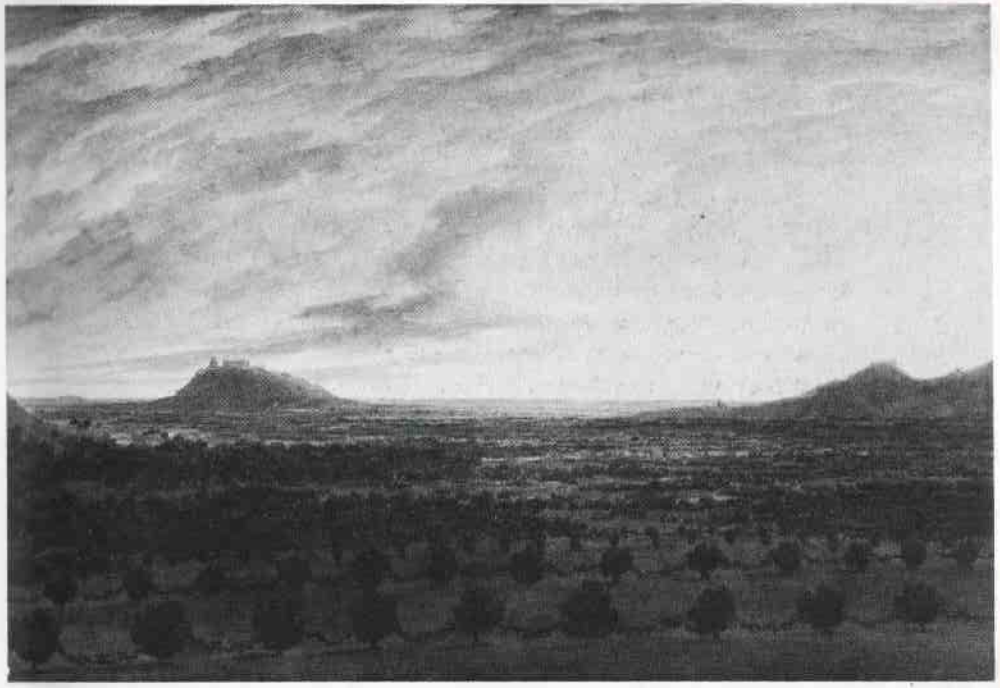
> *These rules which are discover'd, not devised,*
> *Are nature still, but nature methodized.*

In Cozens' own works there is a highly poetic mood, particularly in his wash drawings; yet he breaks no new ground, and his fanciful mountains and cascades lead right back to the more exotic landscape painters of the seventeenth century. It was only when such imaginativeness was brought to bear on the description of actual places that further developments arose.

The merging of these grew naturally out of the desire of the country gentleman to have his house and possessions recorded in a manner appropriate to the new sensibility, and from the wish of the traveller to bring



27 ALEXANDER COZENS
Ink blot composition
1785



28 JOHN ROBERT COZENS *View from Mirabella* 1782–83

back with him mementoes of his experiences. Above all it was the scenes in Italy that sparked off a new approach to topography; for it was these scenes that were supposed to have inspired the great classical landscape painters themselves. As the English painter Jonathan Skelton wrote to his patron William Herring when travelling the Campagna in 1758, 'This antient city of Tivoli I plainly see has been the only school where our two most celebrated landscape painters Claude and Poussin studied.'

The English studied it too, and when they did so they used watercolour. Employed at first for convenience as a sketching medium, this rapid technique was admirably suited for capturing the most transient and fleeting moments of a landscape, the changes of light and atmosphere.

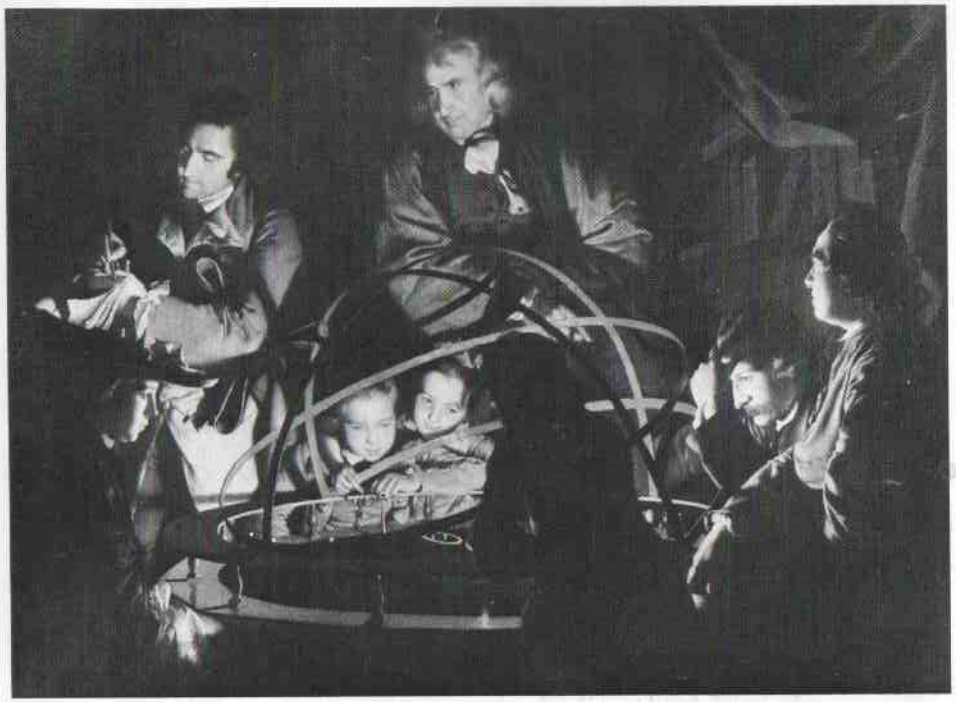
No watercolour painter did more to raise topography above the level of *reportage* than Alexander's son John Robert Cozens (1752–97). He developed his father's sense of mystery and sensitivity to light to a degree that led Constable later to exclaim that Cozens was 'all poetry'. In the works that resulted from his visits to Italy – in particular those from his second visit, made in the company of Beckford in 1782–83 – such poignancy is present almost to the point of painfulness. Whether he is recording the barren,

overpowering mountains of Sicily, or a simple view across vineyards on the
28 plains, the scene is responded to with unguarded sensibility. He was fascinated above all with moments of changefulness, when every feature becomes transformed, to arouse a new curiosity. In the view across the plains the vines, with their connecting creepers, become strange silhouettes. The hills are stranded in a limitless plain, which the dark clouds are encroaching. All is described with the most careful gradations of tone – largely monochrome, but with telling hints of blue and green. Fantasy has become experience. Yet perhaps there was more urgency to the process than mere curiosity. For it was less than a decade after painting such works that Cozens lost his reason. He died insane in 1797, at the age of forty-five.

The natural sciences

No other artist of his generation perceived landscape so closely as John Robert Cozens. Yet there were many others who sought to relate incident to emotion and explore the range of experience. It is hardly surprising that observations often came close to the activities of contemporary scientists or 'natural philosophers'. Scientists of a former, more rationalist age had, like Sir Isaac Newton, postulated a model of the universe which functioned with clockwork precision and regularity and believed that observation and deductive reasoning would uncover all its parts; but the scientists of this age were more aware of the limitations of man's knowledge and the way in which the unknown seemed always to slip his grasp. As the chemist Sir Humphry Davy said: 'Though we can perceive, develop, and even produce, by means of our instruments of experiment, an almost infinite variety of minute phaenomena, yet we are incapable of determining the general laws by which they are governed; and in attempting to define them, we are lost in obscure though sublime imaginings concerning unknown agencies.'

The mechanistic universe was replaced by one that was inspired by the idea of organic growth. It was a time of rapid expansion in the natural sciences, with the development of such new fields as comparative anatomy, which was to have a formative effect on the evolutionary theories of Jean-Baptiste Lamarck and Charles Darwin, and the supplementation of Newton's analysis of the spectrum with the investigation of the physiological and psychological effects of light. While few scientists would have accepted the poet Goethe's assault on Newton's analysis in his own *Theory of Colours*, they would have seen the justice in his remark that dissection will not tell you enough to understand the functions of a living organism. It was only when he had succeeded in devising an experiment that allowed him to observe electricity in motion that Michael Faraday was able to trace the generation of an electromagnetic field.



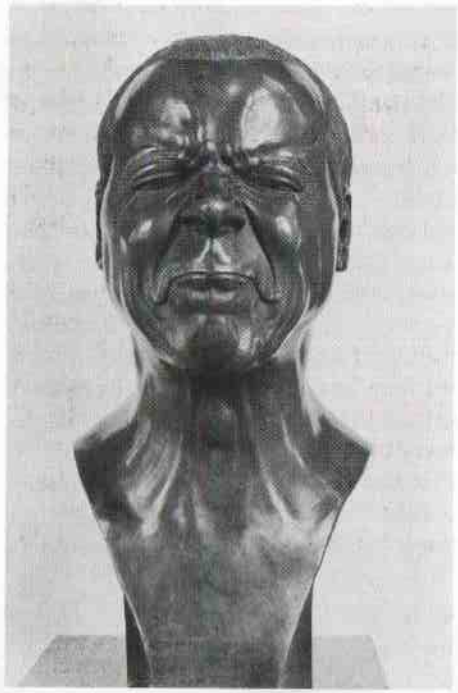
29 WRIGHT OF DERBY *Philosopher Giving a Lecture on the Orrery* 1766

The mysteries of nature, which could enthrall Sir Humphry Davy, could also excite the layman. The fashionable would attend experiments conducted by famous scientists, and the general interest was exploited by itinerant demonstrators with a repertoire of simple devices. Joseph Wright of Derby (1734–97), always a responsive recorder of informed interests, used a number of such occasions as a basis for some of his lamplight pictures during the 1760s. Just as he had exploited the effects of chiaroscuro in *Three Persons viewing the 'Gladiator' by Candlelight* (1764–65) to suggest wonderment at the antique, so he recorded a similar sense of excitement at nature in his *Philosopher Giving a Lecture on the Orrery* (1766) and *Experiment* 29
with an Air Pump (1768). The fascination of the philosopher's audience in the *Orrery* is reflected as the light falls on their faces. The lamp which illuminates them – concealed from our gaze by the silhouette of the boy in the foreground – occupies the position of the sun in the model of the heavens that is being explained to them. Each has a different reaction. The children are excited, the adults thoughtful; with the exception of one – apparently a local cartographer – who takes notes. The philosopher, who looms above

them in a halo of darkness, is distinguished from the observers by his rhetorical gesture and slightly unkempt appearance. Yet he may not have been such a mysterious figure to them, for he was probably John Whitehurst, a local watchmaker. Certainly the figures are portraits, and the circumstances of the occasion need not have been contrived: for the lighting conditions would have been necessary for the orrery to operate effectively.

These entertainments were made more appealing by the benefits that were felt to derive from them. Davy recommended amateur scientific investigation because it 'may become a source of consolation and of happiness, in those moments of solitude, when the common habits and passions of the world are considered with indifference. It may destroy diseases of the imagination, owing to too deep a sensibility; and it may attach the affection to objects, permanent, important, and intimately related to the interests of the human species.'

Maybe. But the study of science by laymen – which produced valuable contributions by such gifted amateurs as Erasmus Darwin and Goethe – could also provide a cover for charlatans. The kind of showmanship that enthralled the inhabitants of Wright's pictures can also be found in such figures as Friedrich Mesmer (1735–1815), the German doctor who claimed to be able to cure disease through the agency of 'animal magnetism' and was in the habit of stroking his patients with an actual magnet in a dimly lit room to the strains of soft music.



30 MESSERSCHMIDT *The Worried Man* 1770+

Like watchmakers and doctors, many artists had the kind of speculative ingenuity that encouraged them to dabble in such activities. Philip James de Loutherbourg, that master of special effects, abandoned painting in 1789 and took up faith healing – until his house was stormed by an angry and disappointed mob. A more extreme case was that of the Austrian sculptor Franz Xavier Messerschmidt (1736–83), who emerged from a severe illness in 1774 believing himself to be oppressed by evil spirits. He thereafter lived a life of seclusion, devising a system of facial expressions with which he felt he could counter his supernatural persecutors. These grimaces, which he considered to be a genuine discovery, were recorded by him with obsessive realism in a series of sixty-four self-portrait heads. Messerschmidt was clearly a pathological case, yet his derangement was fed by the fashions of his times. In his association of expression and physiognomy with the spirit one can recognize an affinity to Jean Gaspard Lavater's pseudo-scientific *Essays on Physiognomy* (1775–78) in which it is asserted that 'Each perfect portrait is an important painting since it displays the human mind with the peculiarities of personal character.'

30

Character and expression

Messerschmidt belonged to that generation of Central Europeans that had been encouraged to give full rein to their emotions in the belief that expression was the key to revelation. Their inspiration had been that group of writers known in German by the epithet 'Sturm und Drang' – 'Storm and Stress'. Lavater, a Swiss theologian and philosopher, was also associated with the movement, whose principal exponent was the German writer Johann Gottfried Herder. While the movement's emphasis on self-expression and 'Character' were to be vital for Romanticism, it was itself limited in its analysis of emotion. It was more in sympathy with the cathartic effects of the Sublime, than with reflection and evocation. Goethe's early masterpiece *Werther* (1774) epitomized this exaggeration of emotion, with its story of a man who could literally die for love; a magnification of the author's own chagrin at a rejection.

While 'Storm and Stress' was, strictly speaking, a German literary movement, its characteristics reflected a more general exploration of expression. The concept of character gave a new dimension to extremism during the 1770s. An artist like John Hamilton Mortimer (1741?–79) indulged in eccentricities to an extent that verged upon schizophrenia. Coming from a comfortable bourgeois background on the South Coast of England, his art flashed from polite conversation-pieces of Dutch serenity to wild scenes of crime, eroticism and madness. His fiery, short career (he died at the age of thirty-nine) was acted out in a welter of senseless escapades. He

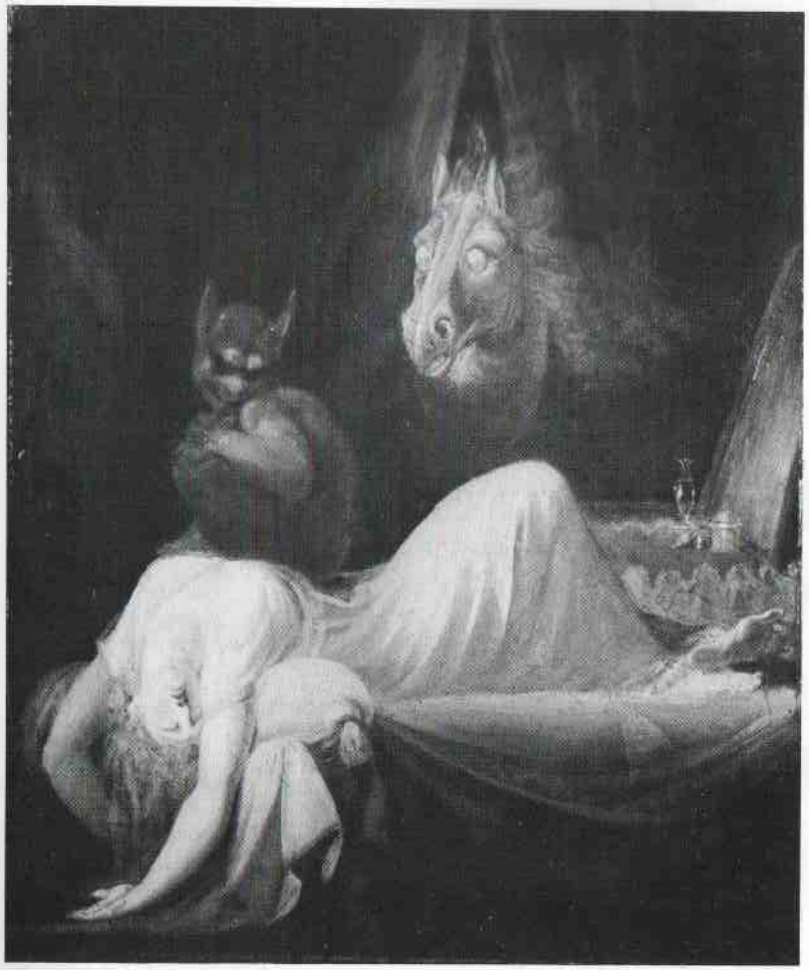
captained boats and engaged in fake battles – almost losing a hand in one of them. Once, when engaged to paint a ceiling for a noble family, he incensed his employers by draining their pond and leaving the fish in it gasping, spread out in rows on the lawn. The reason for this, he informed the lady of the house, was that her beauty 'had so bewitched him that he knew not what he was about'.

If one is tempted to approach Mortimer's art first through his biography, it is because he himself insisted on the importance of the artist's character. His personal model was Salvator Rosa – the seventeenth-century Neapolitan painter of *banditti* who was then commonly believed to have been one himself – and his self-portrait shows him in an appropriately swashbuckling role. Yet there is truth as well as pose in this picture. The features betray a genuine disturbance in the uneven line of the eyebrows puckered across the forehead, which he has just managed to pass off as a gesture of bravado and contempt.

Undoubtedly the most remarkable artist in this generation was Henry Fuseli (1741–1825). A native of Zürich, he was a fellow student of Lavater under the philosopher Bodmer. Having trained as a Zwinglian minister and then embarked on a literary career, he came to painting late. The conversion occurred only after he had settled in England (he came to London in 1763) and been encouraged by Sir Joshua Reynolds.

Fuseli had close contacts with the leaders of 'Storm and Stress' both as a student and as a writer, when he spent some time in Germany and met Herder; the expressive nature of his art certainly accords with this background. He was an admirer of the antique; he spent eight years studying in Italy, from 1770 to 1778. However, his concept of the grandeur of classicism was closer to Piranesi than to Winckelmann, despite his translation of the latter's essay on the imitation of Greek art. His image of the artist overcome with emotion as he reflects on the remains of a colossus betrays a hero-worship which found an outlet in his admiration for the dynamic figures of Michelangelo. Himself small and fiery, he seems to have become obsessed with muscular exaggeration in both his male and female forms.

42 Fuseli's admiration for the antique – which was later to be constantly emphasized in the lectures that he gave at the Royal Academy – seems to have accorded with his desire for a powerful and positive art. If he admired expression, he abhorred vague speculation, and his attitude towards the burgeoning romantic tendencies, which he lived to see grow into a movement, was vituperative. Always a pragmatist, he attacked the 'romantic reveries of platonic philosophy' and declared as early as 1798 that 'the expectations of romantic fancy, like those of ignorance, are indefinite'. While he responded to the legends and history of Northern Europe as much



31 FUSELI *The Nightmare* 1791

as he did to those of Greece, he was interested above all in their heroic and erotic potential. His intentions were always definite. As a reviewer was later to say in the *New Monthly Magazine* in 1831, 'It was he who made real and visible to us the vague and insubstantial phantoms which haunt like dim dreams the oppressed imagination.'

Presumably this writer had in mind Fuseli's most notorious work, *The Nightmare*. The subject, first exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1781 and amended in a subsequent version, is certainly unforgettable, and it remained 31
one of the best known and most plagiarized of contemporary works up to

the mid nineteenth century. At first it might seem that its compulsion depends on the uncovering of some subconscious drive, particularly as it concerns sleep and dreaming; yet it is more intimately connected with the picture's rhetoric. As Nicholas Powell has pointed out, Fuseli does not 'set out to illustrate a dream, so much as to depict the sensations of terror and stifling oppression experienced in a nightmare'.

Typically Fuseli is more interested in eroticism than the irrational in this work; and for this he could draw upon recent medical opinion. For nightmares in young girls are, as Dr John Bond had noted in 1753, often induced by 'a copious eruption of the menses'. Such dreams, suggested both by the pressure against the chest and the supine position of the sleeper, are usually about violent sexual assault – the kind of dream that gave rise to rumours of intercourse with the devil. Sometimes the assailant was described as having come in the form of a fiery steed; though this was more commonly associated with male victims. In this case Fuseli has drawn on a more pictorial tradition of equating the stallion with rampant masculinity; for the startling eruption of its fuming head through the curtains amounts, in visual terms, to a rape.

Whatever his special interests, Fuseli had created a new subject for dramatic treatment, and one that could easily be transformed in to an
57 exploration of the irrational. Seventeen years later, in *The Sleep of Reason*, Goya was to show a man oppressed by fantasies that no medical explanation could dispel.

This era saw the emergence of a greater expressive range in almost every kind of painting. In animal painting the traditional themes of wild and fighting animals were imbued with a new expressive dimension. George Stubbs (1724–1806), a painter of supreme accomplishment who first made his name by raising the traditional English horse portrait to an unprecedented pitch of expertise and elegance, began in the 1760s to create works in which dramatic and violent themes are evident. Perhaps these more startling works, like Fuseli's, were an attempt to establish a reputation as a historical painter; one who was capable of expressing a noble range of emotions. Certainly these subjects coincide with the commencement in 1760 of exhibitions by the Society of Artists, to which Stubbs was a regular contributor. His concern with precision led not only to an admiration for the antique – he went to Rome in 1754 and based some works on classical sculptures – but also to a rigorous study of nature which resulted in a number of distinguished anatomical publications, one of which, his *Anatomy of the Horse* (1766), has yet to be superseded.

Stubbs is one of those artists for whom precision provides a way of expressing an extreme refinement and sensitivity. The impeccable forms of

32 STUBBS *Horse Frightened by a Lion* 1770

his animals, set against glinting landscapes, inspire amazement; yet they do not on the whole invite empathy. There is no surrogate humanity to be found in his struggling horses and wild beasts as there is in those of James Ward and Théodore Géricault. They remain exhibitions of intricate 175
violence, like the animal fights of Hellenistic art or the Baroque. Only one work, the *Horse Frightened by a Lion*, suggests a romantic pathos. Designed as 32
a pendant to one of his many versions of *Horse Attacked by a Lion*, one can still trace in it a memory of that Hellenistic group that inspired the latter. However, while that work describes an action, this implies a threat. Whether or not the landscape was painted in, as has been suggested, by George Barret, the unity of mood is complete. The tense arching of the horse's back echoes the rough contours of the surrounding rocks. Its startled gasp evaporates into a darkened gully, where the lion waits with a menacing though incalculable attentiveness.

33 GAINSBOROUGH
Mary, Duchess of Richmond 1785–88

Portraiture

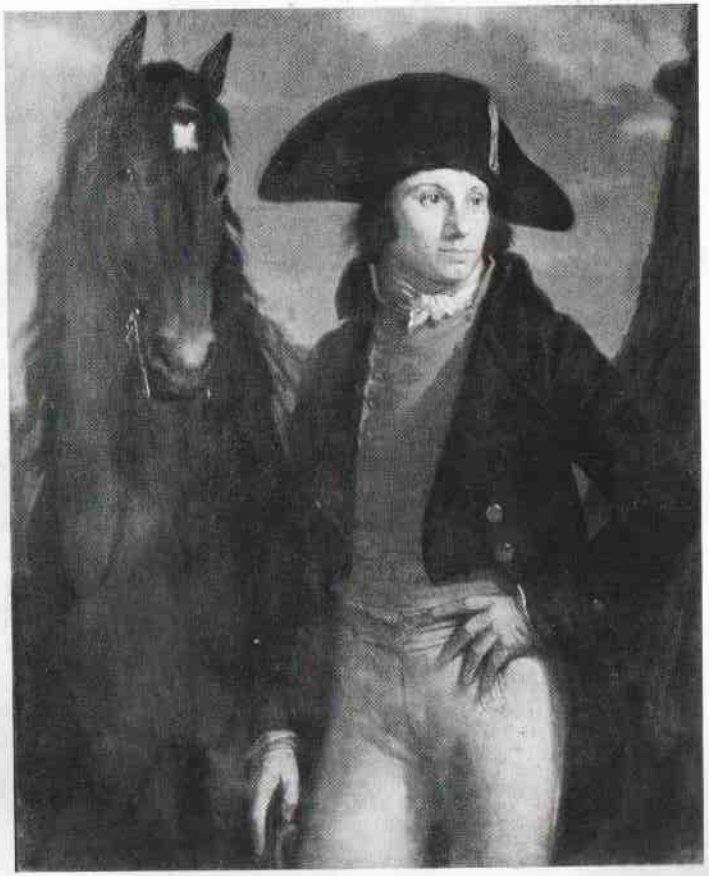
This mounting sensibility is felt most clearly in the image of man himself, not as a type but as an individual, in the portrait. 'Face painting' was the most commercial of arts, but it could still be the most perceptive. Jonathan Richardson – a poor painter but a thoughtful writer – put portraiture at its highest premium when he wrote in 1715: 'A portrait painter must understand mankind, and enter into their characters, and express their minds as well as their faces.'

Yet an eighteenth-century painter worked to his clients' satisfaction. It was their sentiments, not his own, that Richardson sought to discern; 'and as his business is chiefly with people of condition, he must think as a gentleman, and a man of sense, or it will be impossible to give such their true and proper resemblances'. Such a directive presented little problem to most artists, for at

that time they were still flattered at the thought of seeming like gentlemen. And as 'men of sense' they followed closely the changing patterns of opinion.

No artist reflected these nuances more assiduously or appealingly than Thomas Gainsborough (1727–88). An intelligent, perceptive, though not over-learned man, he became the incomparable master of enlightened sensibility. From his early Suffolk portraits of the 1750s to his full-scale essays in the grand style in London in the 1780s he recorded the growing liberality of mood. His love of delicate feeling was such that he refused to strengthen or exaggerate his manner for the sake of making a show at the Academy – as Fuseli had done – and at one time ceased to exhibit there at all. The mentor of his later works was Van Dyck, whose nervous grace he endowed with a new

34 PRUD'HON *Georges Anthony* 1796



warmth and lyricism. His rival Sir Joshua Reynolds, who deplored Gainsborough's lack of 'learned composition', was nevertheless fair-minded enough to concede that Gainsborough's 'unfinished manner' – which he felt was a dangerous example to the students – 'contributed even to that striking resemblance for which his portraits are so remarkable'. Reynolds' explanation for this, that Gainsborough provides the 'general effect of the countenance' which stimulates the imaginations of those who know the sitter sufficiently to 'supply the rest', is perhaps over-literal. Such fine and
33 indistinctive faces as that of *Mary, Duchess of Richmond* seem rather to capture some private fleeting mood. Gainsborough's lifelong passion for landscape enabled him not only to fill his portraits with the ambience of nature – even when the forms of it were purely schematic; it also enhanced his sense of the momentary. Above all it is the passing subtleties of light and atmosphere that seem to bring out the individuality of his sitters' features.

Yet however sentient, his figures are rarely disconcerted. His fine ladies and gentlemen are never so moody as to be ungracious or lose their sense of poise; while his more intimate portraits of friends are full of charm and amusement.

Gainsborough died eleven months before the storming of the Bastille; but many inhabitants of his world of sensibility survived into the revolutionary age. In France, the centre of disturbance, such *hommes de sensibilité* as Chateaubriand 'could not understand how it was possible to live in those times'. Even wholesale admirers of the new order felt the confusion. Pierre-Paul Prud'hon, a painter every bit as receptive as Gainsborough, was an enthusiastic supporter of the Revolution. So was his friend Georges
34 Anthony, a young landowner in the Franche-Comté, whose portrait he painted when staying there to avoid a plague in Paris. Feeling and grace still have much meaning for these two, yet they provide little consolation. Anthony's fleeting gaze encounters no pleasant reflection. His stance – so near to that of the Duchess of Richmond – is no longer supported by a secure world. Cut off at the knees, closed in and closely viewed, he is shown in the open air – but hardly in a landscape. The horse, who contemplates us with disconcerting prescience, and the slanting tree-trunk, do not provide the traditional enhancements. Rather they increase the fragmenting mood. The diagonals they create strengthen the two directions in which Anthony is drawn – his body facing one way, his head the other. It seems to mark a crossroads in a career of many vicissitudes – which were to include a spell as a Cossack Hetman after 1812. Here he is hesitating. But he is already past the point of no return.

The heroic era

It was in the late eighteenth century that the creative genius came, in the words of the art historian Wittkower, 'to be thought of as the highest human type'. Such claims are now so familiar that they can hardly surprise us; they have ensnared too many generations. At the time, however, they implied a deepening sense of purpose.

This new view of the artist was greatly encouraged by current philosophical developments. But it was the dramatic political and social upheavals of the 1790s that brought matters to a head. At a time when the destiny of Europe hung in the balance, what was the creative genius to do? Should he enter the fray, creating propagandist proclamations for the faction he supported? Or should he remain aloof and provide an art whose nobility was an inspiration to man without dictating individual acts? Should he treat his contemporaries to the benefit of his own prophetic insights? Or should he use his perception to puncture pretence and draw attention to the basic human problems that the current conflicts involved?

All these attitudes can be found among artists in Europe during the 1790s. Among those who favoured supportive action the greatest and most influential was the French painter Jacques-Louis David, who ostentatiously placed his art at the service of the new Republic in France. Heroic independence, on the other hand, was essayed by the German artist Asmus Jacob Carstens. But more remarkable than either of these – whose contributions can be seen as extensions and intensifications of the traditions of the history painters – were those two great artists who developed prophetic and critical forms of independent commentary that were new to art: William Blake in England and Francisco de Goya in Spain.

David and the 'exemplum virtutis'

In many ways the rhetorical art of David can be seen as the culmination of a heightening mood that had been developing in history painting since the 1770s. Although the representation of the noble deed, the *exemplum virtutis*, had long been the concern of the history painter, this type of subject became transformed in the late eighteenth century. Just as the revived interest in the

classical ideal was given a Rousseauian topicality, so the example of virtue became couched in the language of sentiment. The readers of such heartfelt moralities as Samuel Richardson's *Pamela, or, Virtue Rewarded* (1740), or of the exploratory stream-of-consciousness of Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (1759–61), expected a similar psychological sophistication from their subject painters – whether these were representing contemporary events or themes from ancient history. Furthermore, the growth of regular academy exhibitions stimulated a new type of commentator: the literary art critic who judged a picture above all by rhetorical standards, by the depth of thought in it, by the sincerity of its narrative, by the technique's emotional impact.

The most imposing of such critics was undoubtedly Denis Diderot. His great reputation as *philosophe* and editor of the truly exhaustive *Encyclopédie* (the French Enlightenment's Authorized Version of all existing knowledge) gave his opinions on art undeniable authority. As befitted an *encyclopédiste*, Diderot was fully briefed on the technical aspects of painting. But the main preoccupation of his Salon reviews (1759–83) was to encourage painters to abandon the frivolities of the Rococo, to make their art thoughtful and sober. He longed to see the artist 'at last collaborating with dramatic poetry in order to move, to educate, to improve us and induce us to virtue'.

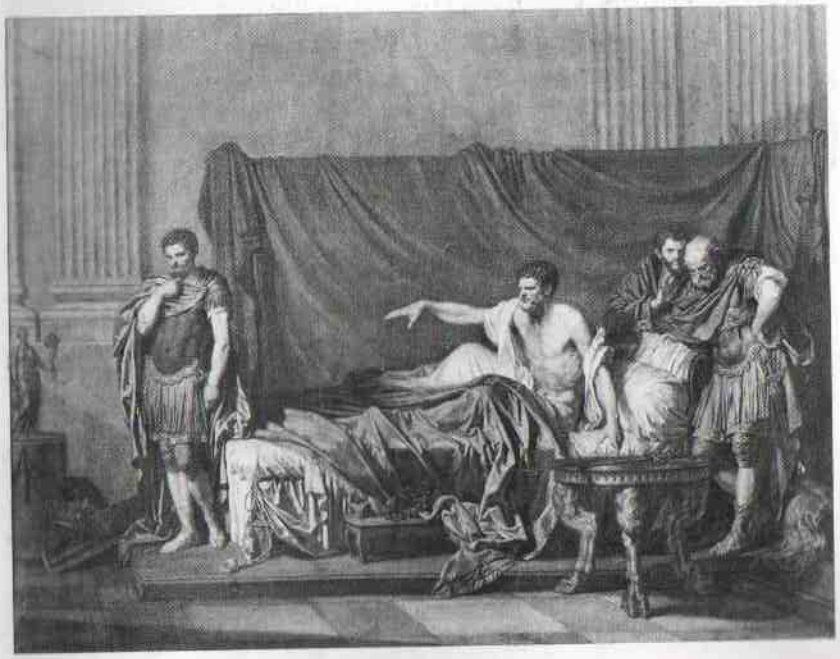
It has been remarked by Anita Brookner that Diderot's call was finally met by the emergence of Jacques-Louis David, whose epoch-making *Oath of*
38 *the Horatii* was exhibited at the Salon the year after Diderot's death. For no other French artist of the time possessed the genius to be able to enact the writer's dictum 'paint as they spoke in Sparta' in all its stylistic, moral and intellectual implications.

Diderot himself had to be content with pretenders. For a time he thought he had found his man in Jean-Baptiste Greuze (1725–1805), the author of the
35 *Death of a Paralytic*, the work that inspired the outburst quoted above. Originally entitled *The Results of a Good Education*, it certainly had the right kind of programme. Greuze also took care to address his public in an appropriate language, and the tender emotions expressed by the dutiful family surrounding the dying paralytic were enough to bring at least one young lady visitor to the Salon of 1763 to the verge of tears. The portrayal of the subject was sentimental, but not vulgar. There was enough of a classical composition in the design, enough sobriety in the handling of the paint, to appeal to people's sense of decorum.

Yet while Greuze was able to exploit his contemporaries' sensibilities, he could not satisfy more rigorous demands. When he attempted a subject in
36 the grand manner, *The Emperor Septimius Severus Reproaching his son Caracalla for Having Plotted against his Life*, in 1769, the result was limp and

35 GREUZE *Death of a Paralytic* 1763

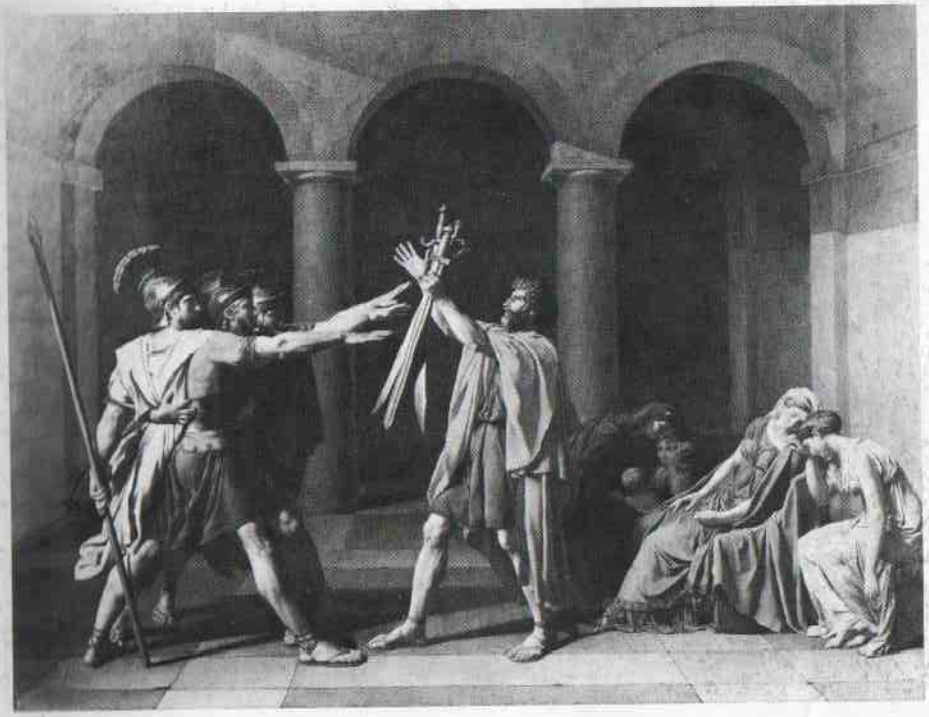
36 GREUZE *The Emperor Septimius Severus Reproaching his Son Caracalla for Having Plotted Against his Life* 1769



37 WEST *Death of General Wolfe* 1770

vacuous. It earned him the contempt not only of the Academy but also of Diderot; for, in exposing his own limitations, Greuze had also exposed the failure of modern painting to live up to the *philosophe*'s expectations.

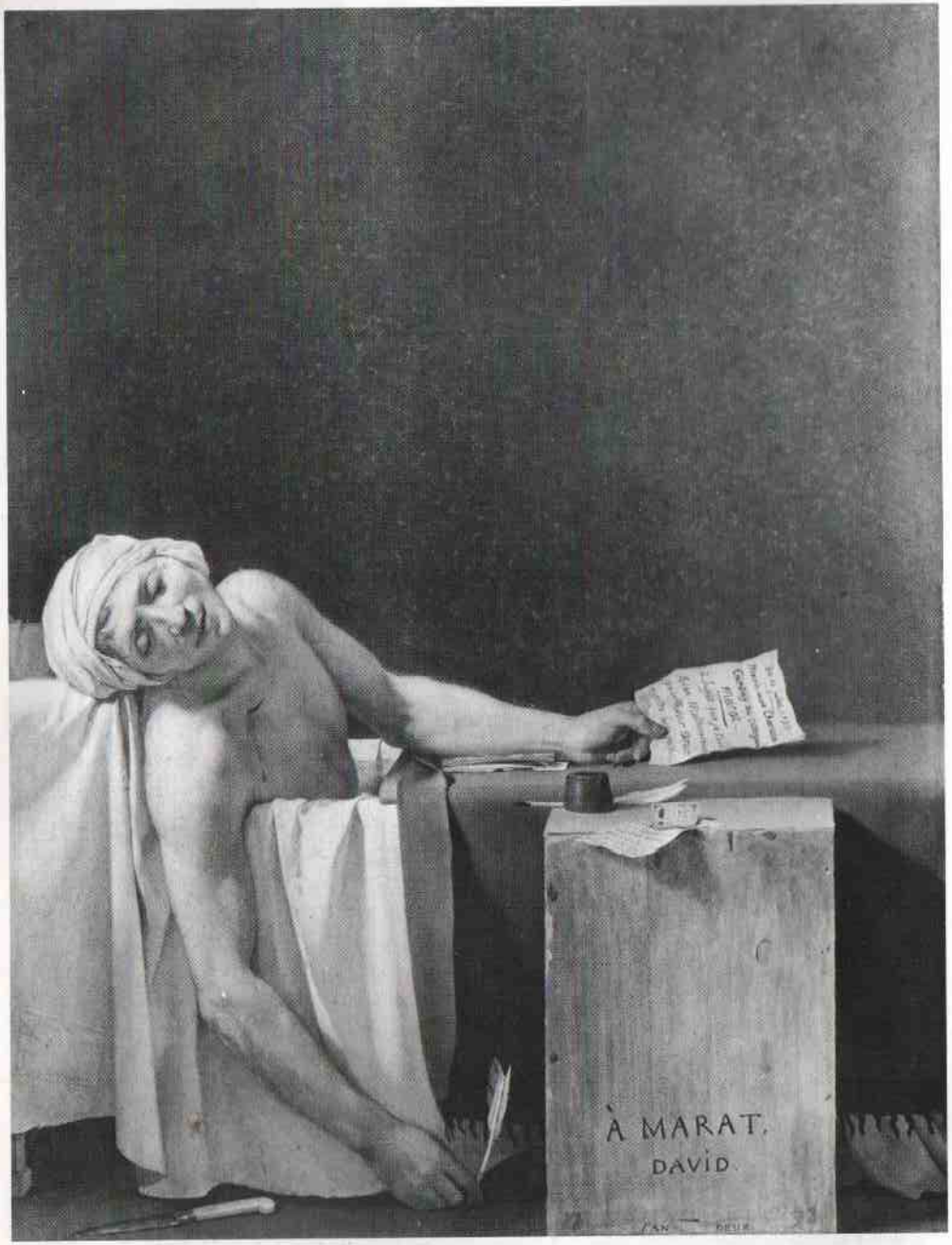
Undoubtedly the immense success in London one year later of Benjamin
37 West's (1738–1820) *Death of General Wolfe* lay in his skilful interweaving of high art with contemporary appeal: of the grand manner with *reportage*. And, while Greuze flattered the sentimental with visions of virtue, this American-born artist – who had settled in England after a period of study in Rome – could make colonial wars of expansion seem truly heroic. Disregarding Reynolds' assertion that a heroic subject could be rendered adequately only if the figures were draped in the 'generalized' clothes of the antique, West took care to record the actual uniforms of the British soldiers, and the barren landscape of the heights around Quebec, arguing that the 'event took place on 13 September 1759, in a region of the world unknown to the Greeks and Romans, and at a period of time when no such nations, nor heroes in their costumes any longer existed'.



38 DAVID *Oath of the Horatii* 1784

Yet this actuality is only superficial. It clothes a composition which bears no relation to the circumstances of Wolfe's death. In the best traditions of the grand manner, everything enhances the central theme. The group with the dying hero – looking for all the world like a Christian *Pietà* – is flanked by sorrowing officers. (Most of these were nowhere near Wolfe at the time, but paid West £100 each to have their portraits included.) The *gravitas* of their grief culminates in the drooping pennant that is held above the protagonist. Even the elements pay tribute, for the storm clouds are being dispelled by the English victory, indicated by the messenger who bursts in, in the nick of time, from the left. In the foreground the artist lapses into pure allegory with a fictive Indian who, (apart from providing some regulation nudity), also symbolizes the place and also, with his pensive gesture, the mood of the occasion.

West had shown triumphantly that modern subjects could be heroic without losing any of their sense of the moment. The results of his success were more far-reaching than might at first be expected, for it encouraged



39 DAVID *Death of Marat* 1793

accuracy of detail in all forms of history painting. West himself provided, at the request of George III, a medieval *Death of Bayard* (1772) and a classical *Death of Epaminondas* (1773) as pendants to his *Wolfe*. In France the vogue for historical accuracy led to such medieval costume-pieces as Berthélemy's *Retaking of Paris from the English*, which superficially resemble the later art of 70
the *romantiques*.

Jacques-Louis David (1748–1825) himself held West in the highest esteem for his achievement, and, like him, painted historical pictures in a thoroughly modern way: the success of the *Oath of the Horatii* which shows 38
the three brother heroes of ancient Rome swearing to fight to the death for their country, was not simply due to the effect of the purist Neo-classical tendencies that he had picked up in Rome; for the work contains as well a dramatic sense of *reportage* heightened by the suggestion of archaeological exactness. The full shock of its radical design comes from the way the highlit diagonals of the figures cut across the background symmetry. The crescendo of the action – the outstretched hands and clutched swords – is as sharp and loud as the oath that the Horatii must be uttering.

Set in a box-like space and illuminated by a raking light, the picture is – in the best sense of the word – staged. It is hardly surprising to find a later composition of David's, the *Brutus* of 1789, becoming the subject of a tableau at the end of a presentation of Voltaire's play on the theme. The *Horatii* is a revolutionary work; but the revolution is a pictorial one. In political terms it represents nothing so much as the reforms that had been encouraged in French official art by Louis XVI's minister with responsibility for the arts (the Surintendant des Bâtiments), the Comte d'Angivillers. Just as Louis himself had attempted to restore morality at court and check the country's economic ruin, so the Rococo had been virtually ordered out of the Academy by Angivillers. The theme of the *Horatii* – patriotism – was hardly subversive. In any case, David's work was commissioned by Angivillers, and was gratefully acquired on behalf of the Crown after it had received tumultuous applause when exhibited in Rome and at the Paris Salon. If the picture later came to be seen as a herald of the French Revolution, it was because the monarchy had been less successful in fostering reform in the economy than in the arts.

Yet whatever the political background to the picture, its uncompromising directness also reflected the artist's personal determination and passion. It was only through such qualities that he had been able to overcome the unpromising beginning to his career – he won the Prix de Rome only at the fourth attempt. Throughout his life he was to follow his convictions with undiminished ardour. The events of the Revolution made him a committed republican; one of the signatories of Louis XVI's death warrant. Later he was

overwhelmed by the personality of Napoleon, declaring that 'there is a man to whom altars would have been raised in ancient times'.

This public life – so much a consequence of his heartfelt (if changeable) private convictions – was matched by an equally public sense of art. The winning of the Prix de Rome mattered so much to him that he attempted suicide on the third occasion that he failed. During the Revolution he became a virtual Minister of the Arts, and used his authority to dismantle the Academy (whose powers he had long resented), to establish a museum, to design uniforms and to stage sumptuous celebrations and processions. His art, too, was not simply great, it was demonstrably better than that of his rivals, better produced, more capable of appeal and inspiration. Old opponents like J.F. Peyron (1744–1814) changed their style to fall in line with his; while for younger generations – even down to Delacroix – he remained the father of modern French painting.

David's declamatory art translated readily into the portrayal of modern heroes. He recognized his public duty to honour such heroic moments of rebellion as the *Oath of the Tennis Court* and immortalize the Revolution's
39 fallen heroes. His *Death of Marat* was designed to form the focus of a quasi-antique memorial celebration – together with a similar portrayal of another Jacobin martyr, Lepeletier. The simple tribute on the upturned box in the foreground, À MARAT, DAVID, was addressed by the artist to one he believed to be the equal of Plato, Aristotle and Socrates.

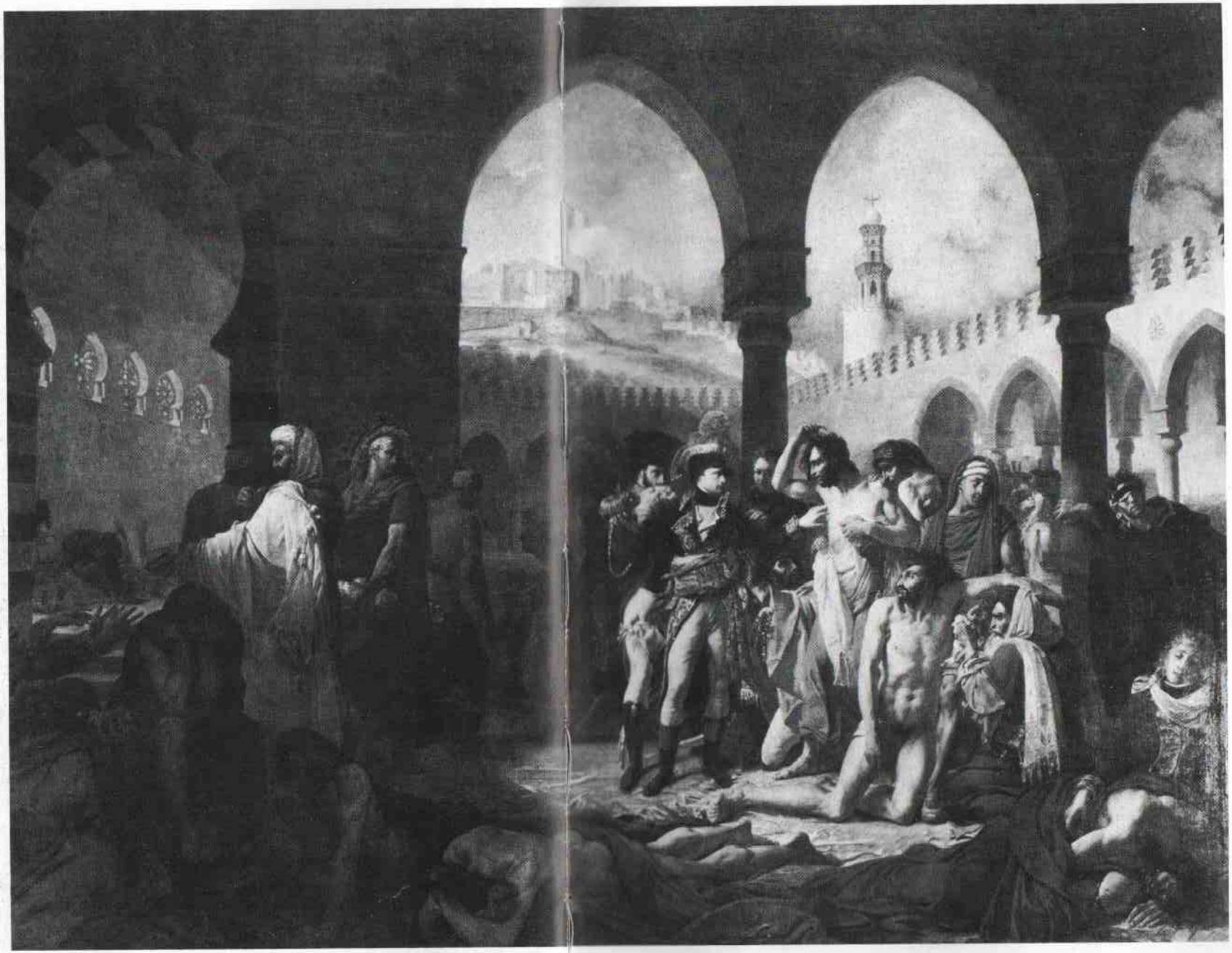
Although David glamorized his subject, it was still a first-hand record. For as well as the studies that David made of the victim, on the day before the event he had seen him at work in the same bath in which he was assassinated by Charlotte Corday; the bath in which he had to spend most of his days to ease a skin disease. David painted the picture in the heat of emotion, completing it by 14 October 1793, just three months and a day after the Jacobin leader had been murdered.

It is characteristic that David should be at his most moving when he is most daring. Nowhere else does the familiar placing of human accidentals in a sparse rectilinear structure achieve such a pared-down image, yet nowhere else is the mood so tender. While the arms of the *Horatii* move tautly upwards, those of *Marat* fall in a gently declining rhythm. Around them is scattered the evidence. The letter by which Charlotte Corday gained admission to see him is in his left hand, the knife with which she stabbed him is beneath him in the shadows. The *Horatii* culminated in a shout; here there is utter silence. All motion has ceased, except that of the quill pen as it sinks from his lifeless hand to the ground.

After the fall of his hero Robespierre and his own subsequent imprisonment in 1794, David moved from the forefront in both art and

politics. He was later appointed Napoleon's Painter, but he never wielded the same authority again. Even his style ceased to be a paradigm for others. His most successful pupils, Gros and Ingres, painted in quite different ways, while in his own studio there emerged a group of dissidents, the Primitifs, who adhered to a more rigorous view of antique art and denounced the sensationalist side of their master's style as 'rococo'. Obscure and now forgotten as artists, the Primitifs under their chief spokesman Maurice Quai were influential as propagandists among their contemporaries. David did himself modify his art, reducing its drama and feeling for texture to make it more 'Grecian'. Yet by doing so he lost the enlivening sense of the momentary. By the time he went into exile (as a regicide) at the 1815 Restoration the old power could be felt only in his portraits, which still impress for the honesty with which they make their record. 'My art consists of deeds, not words,' he once wrote. Pictures were for him events; public demonstrations of what he knew to be true. He was not like those other great geniuses, Dante and Milton, who after a political career turned in their years of disgrace to the production of their finest achievements. As his public life declined, so did his artistic.

Napoleon had no less use for propaganda than had the Jacobins, and David – as his official painter – certainly did his best to provide it for him. But although he produced some magnificent portraits of his master, his vast records of Napoleonic deeds carry none of the conviction of those of his pupil Antoine-Jean Gros (1771–1835). For Napoleon's mode of leadership was quite different from that of the Deputies of 1789. He commanded allegiance through a personal charisma that he strengthened by an appeal to tradition – restoring Christianity in France and calling himself Emperor – and by the exotic pageant of his foreign campaigns. Gros had been trained in David's studio between 1785 and 1792, when the latter's style was at its most dramatic. Since then he had developed a greater sense of colour, movement and atmosphere by studying Rubens and the Venetians. The plea of his pictures is no longer one of rationality. There is no logic in the theme of the
Plague at Jaffa. It shows Napoleon during his Egyptian campaign of 1798, 40
when he was entertaining notions of establishing an empire in the East. When a large part of his army succumbs to the plague, Napoleon restores morale in a courageous gesture by visiting the sick. Gros builds up the atmosphere vividly, exploiting the full exoticism and horror of the scene. Yet the central action – Napoleon touching a sore on one of the victims – has no meaning; or rather, its only meaning must be a miraculous one suggesting superhuman powers. Furthermore, the incident itself was deceptive. For Napoleon apparently ordered the sick to be poisoned, so as not to delay his campaign. And even if Gros was unaware of this, he nevertheless perpetrated



40 GROS *Plague at Jaffa* 1804

pictorial inaccuracies. For he updated the costumes of the soldiers to the more dashing uniforms of Imperial times.

Unwittingly Gros provided the lead for the French Romantics. For if Géricault and Delacroix could appreciate the drama in David's art, they found even more to admire in the sheer pictorial indulgence of Gros's painterliness. For his part Gros, who became an establishment figure in Restoration France (he was created Baron in 1824 after decorating the Panthéon with royalist and patriotic scenes), did what he could to counter the new sensuousness. As Delacroix later wrote, 'he made it a point of honour to continue in his lessons all the traditions of David'. Yet in this he failed. His inability to maintain the old standards was cruelly underlined when his ultra-classical *Hercules and Diomedes* was poorly received at the Salon of 1835; not long afterwards he took his own life.

Gros committed the final act of renunciation; but it was for failing to maintain an established order. Neither he nor David wished to make that break with society that was the prerequisite of the Romantic hero. However, even in the age of public heroism alternatives existed. Contemporary with David were those who saw the artist not simply as the painter of heroic subjects, but also as a hero in his own right; and one who claimed the prerogative of independent action.

Heroic genius

Behind the concept of heroic genius lay the belief that it was man's innate gifts that were to be valued above all else. In this there was a conflict with the viewpoint that made the acquisition of learning supreme; and this conflict can be felt in many of the exchanges of the period – not least in the annotations that the outcast visionary William Blake wrote in the margin of his copy of Sir Joshua Reynolds' *Discourses*.

Delivered at the Royal Academy of which he was founding President, Reynolds' *Discourses* (1769–90) were designed to encourage learning in the artist. It is true that their author was far too sensitive a critic not to feel moved by those great artists whose achievements transcended any system. Yet he was always seeking to rationalize the products of genius: even in the case of his great hero Michelangelo, he felt that inspiration had been guided by expertise: 'I will not say Michael Angelo was eminently poetic only because he was greatly mechanical, but I am sure that mechanic excellence invigorated and emboldened his mind to carry painting into the regions of poetry.'

Blake thoroughly opposed the notion that acquired skill in any way supplied the artist's vision. When Reynolds wrote 'our minds should be habituated to the contemplation of excellence', he expostulated: 'Reynolds

41 JAMES BARRY
Self-portrait c.1802

42 FUSELI *The Artist Moved by the Grandeur of Antique Fragments* 1778–79

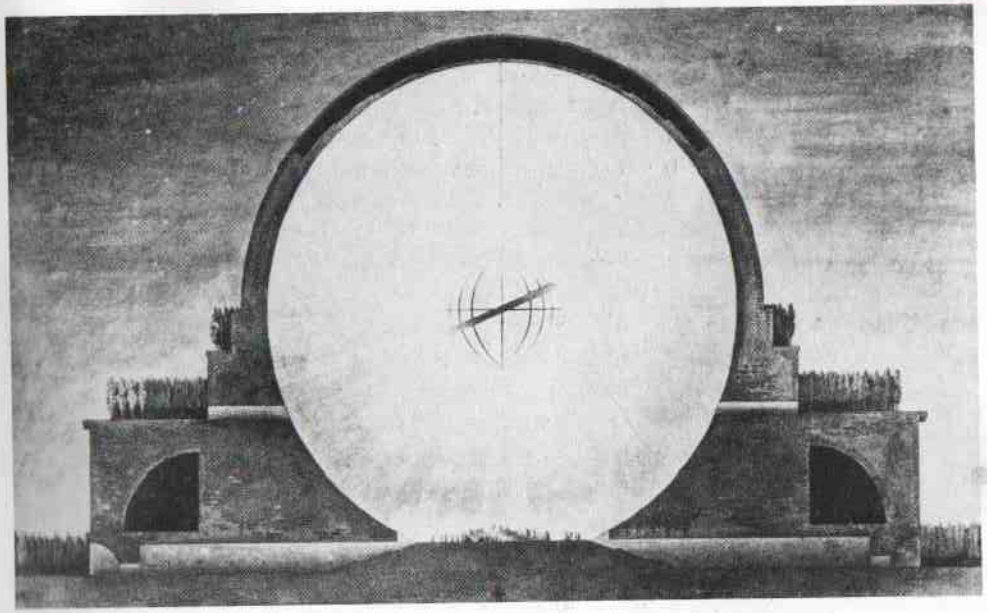
thinks that Man Learns all that he knows. I say on the Contrary that Man Brings All that he has or can have Into the World with him.' For Blake, it was only by protecting man's original innocence that his vision could be preserved. As Blake's contemporary, the German poet Schiller, declared in his *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1795), 'A true genius must be naïve or it is none.'

Schiller's and Blake's insistence on this primal inspiration implies a fear of its loss. This same fear underlies the nostalgic self-portrait by a less gifted
41 contemporary, the history painter James Barry (1741–1806). Painted when the artist was in his sixties, it harks back to the time of his youth, when he was a rising talent – the protégé of Edmund Burke, and a prize-winning student in Italy. Since then he had struggled to counter the neglect of monumental art in Britain by painting murals for the Society of Arts at his own cost; and he had been ignored. Here – as in the Society of Arts murals – he appears as the Greek painter Timanthes, the very same artist whom Pliny had used as an example of the power of suggestion in painting. He is holding in his hands a work of his own, a reconstruction of Timanthes' *Sleeping Cyclops* as described by Pliny, in which scale is suggested by the device of showing some satyrs measuring the giant's thumb with a thyrsos. Emotionally, too, this image of the young Barry/Timanthes is about incompleteness; for it was in the enactment of Barry's career that something had gone wrong.

An artist who stands up for his vision, in the way Blake, Schiller and Barry did, has to have a heroic temperament. No doubt each of these would have agreed with Baudelaire when he wrote that 'extreme genius' must possess, besides an 'immense passion', a 'formidable will'. It was presumably some such thought that made Barry place himself in his self-portrait at the feet of Hercules. Like most of his generation, he expressed the heroic by means of size.

If the heroic were simply a matter of scale, Fuseli would be its master. But the fact that his sketch of himself overcome at the sight of the remnants of a
42 colossus on the Capitoline Hill in Rome now tends to appear comic, reveals
39 the shortcomings of his art. Few would want to laugh at David's *Marat*, for it strikes one with the force of a revelation. In art the heroic implies a meaningful presentation of a significant thought or event; and exaggeration can never be a substitute for insight.

The faith of the Enlightenment in the revelations of wisdom, and in their power to change man's destiny, encouraged a growing veneration of artists
43 and thinkers. The project of the French architect Etienne-Louis Boullée (1728–99) for a cenotaph to Sir Isaac Newton is perhaps its most eloquent pictorial expression. The drawings for it suggest a structure that would have exposed an idea with overwhelming clarity. Although Boullée probably



43 BOULLÉE *Project for a Cenotaph to Sir Isaac Newton* 1784

never did more than dream of his design being carried out, he characteristically regarded it as his most important creation. The central chamber – with the sarcophagus at its base – is a perfect sphere, and all the supporting forms – cylinders and curves – are its derivatives. The interior suggests the firmament (there are holes in the surface through which daylight can produce the effect of the constellations of the night sky) while from the outside the idea of the sphere is preserved by means of curves cut in the lower cylinder. Perfection and the Universal are thus indissolubly linked; and Boullée honours Newton as the genius who brought these concepts closer to man's grasp: 'O Newton, as by the extent of your wisdom and the sublimity of your genius you determined the shape of the earth; I have conceived the idea of enveloping you in your own discovery.'

According to A.M. Vogt this 'discovery' was Newton's deduction that the earth had originally been perfectly spherical before it had become 'flattened' through rotation. In Boullée's estimation he thus took his place alongside Rousseau as one of the revealers of a primal perfection since corrupted by experience.

The starkness in the forms and mood of this project can be compared with other major works of the 1780s. It would be tempting to connect such 'revolutionary' creations with the growing political unrest in Europe; yet it

44 LEDOUX Customs house, Paris 1784

would be unwise, for there are few direct links. Boullée showed no interest in political affairs, and the other great 'revolutionary' architect of the day – 44 Claude-Nicolas Ledoux (1736–1806) – created spartan customs houses which imposed the hated royal levies.

It was in the 1790s, when ideals were being put to the test, that the heroic gained a more urgent dimension. Such writers and artists as Blake, Schiller and Goya – who had supported enlightened liberalism against oppression in their respective countries – were now thrown back on their own resources. Schiller's crisis was the one that was expressed most publicly – as indeed had been his previous social involvement through such plays as *The Robbers* (*Die Räuber*), 1781. In the early 1790s, after the Reign of Terror in France, he examined anew his political convictions and the significance of his, the artist's, role for his contemporaries. He firmly believed that art became more, rather than less, important during times of upheaval: 'if man is ever to solve the problem of politics in practice he will have to approach it through the problem of the aesthetic, because it is only through Beauty that man makes his way to Freedom'.

Schiller felt that the connection between art and politics was on the level of individual reflection. It was the sensibilities aroused by art, the awareness of innate beauty and nobility, the freely chosen involvement of the faculty of judgment, that could develop in man those qualities necessary for the possession of true liberty.

Both the independence and the moral responsibility assumed here were to become central to Romantic thought. They underlie Shelley's *Defence of Poetry*, and are shared by critics as dissimilar as Ruskin and Baudelaire.

For all his independence of thought, Schiller's sense of ennobling beauty was still inspired by a vision of antiquity. In this he was close to the greatest Northern monumental artist of his generation, the German Asmus Jacob Carstens (1754–98). This artist's life took the form of a long and painful pilgrimage from a poverty-stricken home on the Baltic to his Mecca, Rome. He died there after six years' residence, at the age of forty-four.

Carstens' pride and sense of independence were continually driving him into difficulties, but they also provided him with the highest sense of his responsibility as an artist. 'I belong to humanity, not to the Academy of Berlin,' he retorted on the memorable occasion when he was requested by a Prussian minister to return to his teaching duties. His own desire was for 'a wall seventy ells high, like that of Michelangelo's *Last Judgment*, on which he can work himself to death and become immortal'.

Although Carstens never got his wall, his large chalk designs – which form the major part of his mature work in Rome – are saturated with the Michelangelesque. Often he seems to be too close to his hero. But his best-known work, *Night with her Children, Sleep and Death*, has a deeply personal 45 pathos. Against the turmoil of the Three Fates spinning and cutting the

45 CARSTENS *Night with her Children, Sleep and Death* 1795

thread of man's life, the introspective figure of Night draws her veil over Sleep and Death in a simple and affecting gesture. Perhaps Carstens was aroused by the uncertainties of the times or even by his own approaching death. In any case, he seems to have taken to heart the passage where Schiller calls on the artist to be the 'child of his age' without being its 'minion'. For this artist of Schiller's, after having 'come to maturity under a distant Grecian sky', should 'return, a stranger, to his own country; not, however, to gladden it by his appearance, but rather, terrible like Agamemnon's son, to cleanse and purify it'.

Such high-flown idealism may seem to us overstated. Yet there were many at the time who were seeking for an art that could equal the extremes that they had experienced, and these people had a special sympathy for the heroic. When Stendhal came to see the Sistine Chapel, after serving under Napoleon on the Russian campaign, he recognized a 'daring power' which recalled his most awesome moments:

'When, during our wretched retreat from Russia, we were suddenly awakened in the middle of the night by a burst of cannon fire which seemed to be coming closer all the time, all our strength appeared to flow into our hearts; we were in the presence of destiny, and, indifferent to matters of vulgar interest, were prepared to measure our lives against fate. The sight of Michelangelo's pictures re-awakened in me this almost forgotten sensation. Great souls are sufficient unto themselves; others become frightened and go mad.'

The prophet

'Jesus and his Apostles and Disciples were all artists.'

There is no mistaking the voice of William Blake (1757–1827). This painter-poet, the most impenitent of visionaries, has always been a paradox. Even today opinion divides between regarding him as a curious eccentric and as the most profound spirit of his age. It is more difficult to take a middle ground. One cannot play the connoisseur with him; either one believes in Blake or one does not.

Like Schiller's artist (*see* above), Blake gives the illusion of being formed apart from his age. Yet his vision was forged in the language of his contemporaries. He was not the only prophet to emerge in the wake of revolution. Quite apart from faith healers and spiritualists like Mesmer and Loutherbourg, there were such millenarians as Joanna Southcott (1750–1814), the religious fanatic who claimed the gift of tongues, pronounced herself the woman in Revelation 12 and thought herself to be pregnant with the second Messiah, 'Shiloh', shortly before her death of dropsy. More generally there was a yearning for the spiritual that had first

46 BLAKE *Elohim Creating Adam* 1795

been expressed in the writings of the Swedish divine Emanuel Swedenborg and now led to the revival of Rosicrucianism and Freemasonry.

There is much to connect Blake with such movements. His paintings and writings were part of a visionary message, often issued in the form of illuminated prophetic books in which he evolved a personal mythology. Yet he offered no patent cures or formulae for salvation. All he offered was the revelation of an artist's insight. His assertion that Christ was an artist was a recognition that an artist's vision, like that of a religious prophet, was synthetic rather than analytic. More than any of his contemporaries he appreciated that creativity had nothing to do with the rational. Unlike Swedenborg, he did not attempt to align mysticism with the Enlightenment. 'Talent thinks, genius sees,' he declared.

It was quite in keeping with this viewpoint that Blake laid little importance on Christ's miracles. For him the Saviour's real message lay in his challenge to authority, his acting 'from impulse, not from rules'. Blake reached right back to the subversive spirit of primitive Christianity, before

the faith had become an established religion. In doing so he was drawing inspiration from the same source as a long tradition of radical millenarians; for him, however, the spirit had been preserved through art. He envisaged
47 Joseph of Arimathaea, the 'secret apostle' who was supposed to have brought Christianity to England, as 'one of the Gothic Artists who built the Cathedrals in what we call the dark ages'.

It was the making real of this vision that was the artist's task:

To see a World in a Grain of Sand
and a Heaven in a Wild Flower
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
and eternity in an hour.

The experience must come through seeing and holding, the action of the senses, 'the chief inlets of the soul'. Blake rejected the intellectual separation of mind and body. The visible must be recognized, in a Neo-platonic sense, as one manifestation of a greater entity. All his prophetic books involve contemporary situations. His most ecstatic, *Jerusalem*, is full of references to London, the city that was Blake's earthly reality. And it was through the

47 BLAKE
Joseph of Arimathaea 1773

48 INGRES *Dream of Ossian*
1809

recognition of this continuum that he hoped to reveal the Kingdom of God on Earth.

In his writings and in his paintings, Blake's method could be described as naïve. Nor would he have taken exception to this, for he found archaic man and the child to be nearest to the Divine. His approach was archetypal. In a way more generally familiar since Jung, he studied ancient myths to discover primal meanings.

Blake's point of departure was the growing admiration for 'primitive' poetry that had led to the revaluation of Homer and Hesiod as the bards who had preserved the legends of Greece before they could be debased by civilization. This concern for rediscovering original purity had also turned Western Europeans back to their own early history, to the epics of Dante and the legends of the German *Nibelungenlied*. It had even led to the discovery of a Homer of their own, the fictive Gaelic bard Ossian, whose sagas (almost complete fabrications) were published by James Macpherson in 1762–63.

Ossian fulfilled the eighteenth century's highest expectations of the primitive. His heroes were both courageous and courteous; far better behaved, in fact, than the squabbling protagonists of the *Iliad*. Their religion, too, was more 'natural', being based directly on elemental spirits. By the 1770s Ossian was famous throughout Europe. The hero of Goethe's *Werther* (1774) preferred him to Homer, and so did the Primitifs in David's studio. Napoleon's house at Malmaison was decorated with scenes which combined his own legend with that of the bard, such as Girodet's *Ossian Receiving Napoleon's Generals*. Ingres emphasized the inspirational side of Ossian in his
48 *Dream of Ossian*, a preliminary design for a ceiling in the palace Napoleon was to have occupied in Rome.

The Ossianic sagas provided a format and a metre which Blake adapted for his own prophetic books. Although he did not borrow any of the stories, he copied the primitive flavour of the names.

In keeping with the primitive and naïve aspects of his poetry, Blake also limited his painting techniques. The explicitness of outline was preferred to effects of colour, and the illusionism of oil painting was rejected in favour of a simulation of tempera painting, which he referred to as 'fresco'. Despite this hardness of style, Blake was highly suspicious of the antique. Like the Schlegels (with whom he shared the concept of art as religious experience) he came to see Grecian art as mechanical: 'Grecian art is mathematical form, Gothic art is living form.' He explained the virtues that did exist in classical sculptures by considering them to be pale copies 'from greater works of the Asiatic Patriarchs'. He seems to have been seeking to rediscover some such archetype when adapting the figure of Skiron from the Temple of the Winds
46 for the figure of the Creator in *Elohim Creating Adam*.

In material terms Blake's career was a modest one. The son of a London hosier, he was trained as an engraver and attended the Royal Academy Schools to continue his education. Although he later described himself as 'having spent the Vigour of my Youth and Genius under Oppression of Sr Joshua and his Gang of Cunning Hired Knaves Without Employment', he appears to have achieved some recognition at first both as a designer and an engraver. Watercolours of historical subjects in a gentle linear style were exhibited by him at the Royal Academy in the 1780s, placing him in the company of the more imaginative Academicians, like Barry and Fuseli. He was also to be found at this time in fashionable intellectual circles. There are accounts of contact with such radicals as William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft, the great champion of female liberty. He is even reputed to have been the man who persuaded Tom Paine to leave England when that propagandist, whose *Rights of Man* (1791) called for the overthrow of the British monarchy, was on the point of being arrested for high treason.

49 BLAKE *The Sick Rose* 1794

The period which saw Blake's change to a more isolated path is marked by the publication of his *Songs of Innocence* (1789) and his *Songs of Experience* (1794). The first, true to its title, affirms a belief in natural human goodness. Man is seen as the embodiment of the 'Divine Image', full of 'love, mercy, pity, peace'. The *Songs of Experience* mimic the simple lyrics of the former work while opposing its message. Even though Blake finally suppressed the most savage page, in which the 'human form Divine' now stands for 'cruelty . . . Jealousy . . . Terror . . . and Secrecy', he openly questioned throughout the enigma of evil in a God-created world.

In these works Blake became independent in a more material sense. For he devised for them a simple form of relief etching which he could print himself

50 BLAKE From *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* 1793

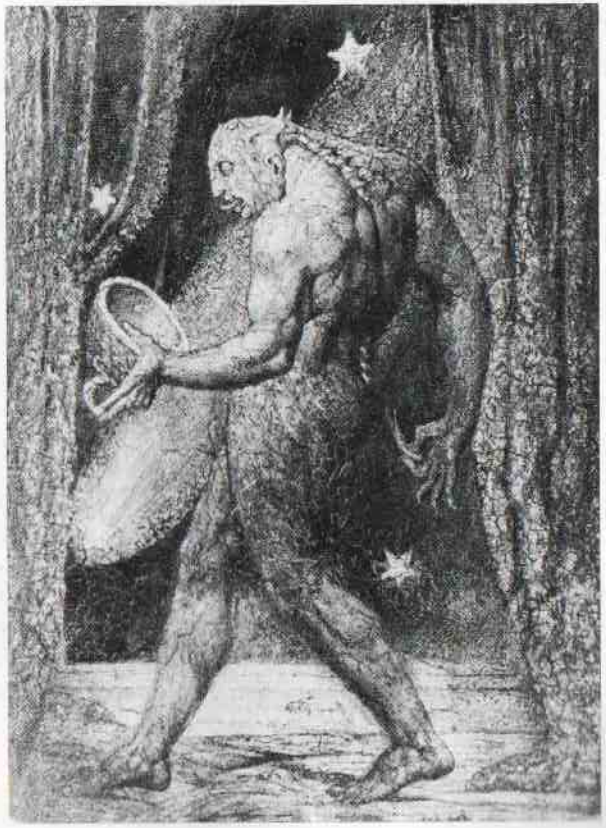
in his own home without the need of an expensive press. The resulting impressions were then touched up, coloured and bound by himself with the aid of his devoted wife. This was the method he used for all his illuminated books. Since word and image were combined in the same plate – as in a medieval manuscript – it led to a close synthesis of Blake's two means of expression. The poem exists in both simultaneously. In *The Sick Rose* it is left
49 to the design to show the fatigue of the deep red bloom as it weighs the weakened stem to the ground.

As events in France inflamed hostility to radicalism in England, Blake went into semi-retirement, renting a small house in Lambeth, then just outside London, on the south bank of the Thames. Disillusionment led him to question his former assumptions; he saw the traditional concepts of good and evil as distinctions that attempted to blot out what could not be
50 comprehended. In his *Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1793) he sought to abolish the division. It is the devil here who asserts that 'Energy is Eternal Delight'. Evil becomes for him the primal urge. Like the seventeenth-century mystic Jacob Boehme (republished in England in the 1760s), he believed it was the oppression brought about by earthly laws that caused this libidinous force to be considered evil.

Blake's prophetic books deal with the repression of energy – political in *America* and *Europe*, social in *Urizen* and sexual in *The Visions of the Daughters of Albion*; and a series of large prints demonstrate the clouding of the spirit by materialism. Newton, who ten years earlier had been celebrated by Boullée as a liberator, here becomes an oppressor, dissecting the world with his dividers. God the Father, too, is oppressive; for it was He, the lawgiver, who

sundered Heaven and Hell by His expulsion of the devil. Called by Blake by His first Biblical name Elohim ('judges') He is shown virtually dragging 46
Adam into existence. These works, exactly contemporary with Carstens' *Night with her Children*, show a similar creation of monumental vigour by 45
the compression of bold figures into a tight space. Both Carstens and Blake drew in fact on Michelangelo's Sistine ceiling for this, and for the morphology of their figures. But unlike Carstens, Blake had inherited none of the Renaissance master's humanism. Nothing could be further from Michelangelo's God, making in man the beauteous embodiment of His own image, than this terrifying picture of a free spirit being enslaved by mortality – with the serpent already entwining his leg.

The dark years of the 1790s were followed by three years in the country (1800–3) at Felpham. When he returned to London he was no more accepted than before – his only one-man show (held in 1809 at his brother's house) was dismissed by the one newspaper that reviewed it as a 'farrago of nonsense'. Yet he seems to have felt a new inner peace, for his interest turned from oppression to salvation. This was the message behind *Jerusalem*, on which he was to work for the next twenty years.



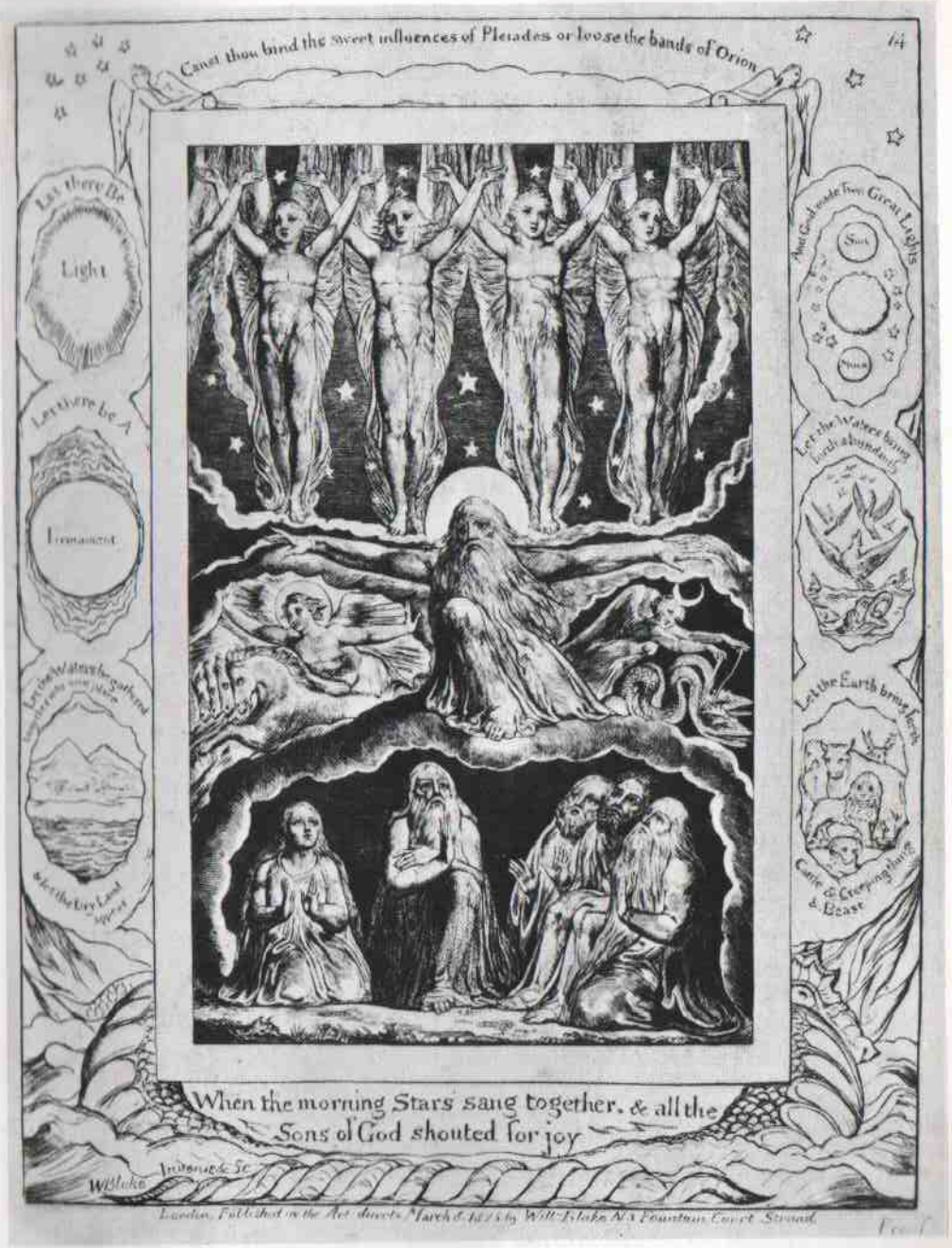
51 BLAKE *Ghost of a Flea* 1819–20

In his art, the titanic forms had given way to more linear and intricate designs. In the long series of scenes of the life of Christ, painted for one of his few devoted patrons, Thomas Butts, the 'friend of my angels', a new appreciation of the Gothic emerges. Gothic form had fascinated Blake ever since he had been sent as an apprentice to make copies of the tombs in Westminster Abbey; yet now the art was to take on a special spiritual meaning for him. It was at about this time – around 1808 – that he revised his apprentice engraving after Michelangelo to identify it as the 'Gothic' artist,
47 Joseph of Arimathaea. Not only do these designs gain energy from the linear rhythms of Gothic art, but they also show at times the adoption of the hierarchical frontal symmetry of the medieval altarpiece – as in the exquisite
72 *Angels Watching over the Tomb of Christ*.

At this time Blake's reputation was at its nadir. Even such sympathizers as Coleridge and the Germanist Crabb Robinson – who compared Blake's views on religion and art to those of Wackenroder (*see* p. 107) – viewed him principally as an intriguing madman. A few years later, however, there emerged a younger generation which was prepared to take him more seriously. Some of these were occultists, whom Blake treated in cavalier manner. He humoured the amateur astrologer John Varley by pretending to have 'visions' in a literal rather than metaphoric sense. He pretended that certain historical figures actually appeared before him, and would draw them as they posed. It was on one such occasion that he sketched the anthropomorphic *Ghost of a Flea*, a bloodcurdling visualization which he
51 later worked up into a tempera painting.

Although still desperately poor, Blake had now achieved the serenity of a patriarch. Perhaps his new circle of admirers – which included such artists as John Linnell (*see* p. 198) – may have stimulated the lyrical mood of his
110 pastoral wood-engravings for Virgil's *Pastorals*. His illustrations to the Book
52 of Job certainly contain a personal message. For the cause of Job's trials lay in the limits of his understanding of the Lord. In the beginning Job had worshipped the Lord piously, obeying all the laws, but, as is written beneath the first picture, 'the letter killeth, the spirit giveth life'. When he had resisted the temptation to curse God for having broken the 'rules' – that is, brought him bad fortune when he had done no wrong – the Lord appeared to him in a whirlwind and revealed to him the mystic totality of the universe. In these illustrations the picture dominates. They show Blake undiminished in vigour both as a visionary and as a practitioner of conventional line engraving – no doubt used because actually financed by Linnell.

When Blake died he was working on another project for Linnell: the illustration of Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Blake's pictorial commentary responds to the imagination that was liberated in Dante as he passed through



52 BLAKE *When the Morning Stars Sang Together . . .* from *The Book of Job* 1823–25

53 BLAKE *Whirlwind of Lovers c.*1824

Hell, but laments his return to the conventional Church in Heaven. As Dante is led by Virgil through the circles of Hell they are shown clothed respectively in red and blue, the colours of feeling and imagination, so essential for the poet. In these watercolours (there was also an uncompleted series of engravings after them), Blake's Michelangelesque forms have become so completely imbued with flickering colours and Gothic linearity that the whole appears as a trance-like rhythm of energy. Such scenes as the
53 *Whirlwind of Lovers*, in which the unfortunate Paolo and Francesca are seen with the others who share their fate, form the perfect conclusion for the career of an artist who had always insisted on the strength and clarity, the super-reality, of the visionary.

Blake died, as he lived, praising the Lord. His latter days of joy and steadfastness are perhaps the most compelling witness to his achievement. In the existential terms that he laid down he had succeeded in reconciling the contraries of Heaven and Hell that had been sundered by the lawgivers. He had survived isolation and degradation with his resilience and his receptiveness unimpaired.

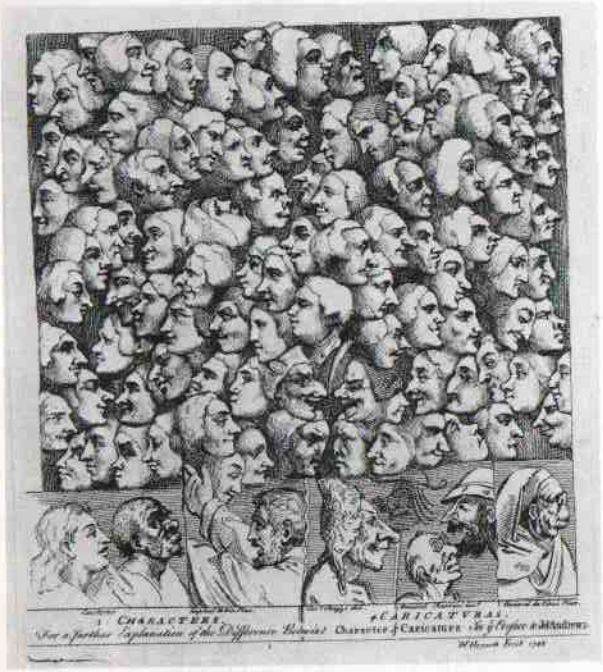
The vision was one way of penetrating the surface; satire is another. Yet this most anti-heroic form of insight assumes many shapes. Sometimes it proceeds by wit, and sometimes by fantasy; and when it does so by the latter it implies the grotesqueness and absurdity of the caricature.

The eighteenth century was a consummate age of satire. The charm and irresponsibility of the Rococo itself was a mockery of the pompous Baroque. Mythology disintegrated into erotic adventures, and that type of social-life painting was popular that poked fun at human conceits. In England and France, where social and political reform were matters of genuine concern, however, such mockery had a serious side. The ironic allegories of Swift, Hogarth and Voltaire were designed to change people's awareness, to make them feel the need for reform. Yet none of these satirists saw any place in their work for the free-ranging inventiveness of caricature. For them it remained too close to the Italian word that described it: *caricare*, 'to exaggerate'; they wished to expose by an appeal to reason. Voltaire would no doubt have agreed with the *Encyclopédie* of his colleague Diderot, when it defined caricature as a kind of *libertinage d'imagination*, which might be used for harmless amusement, but could have no more serious purpose.

For William Hogarth (1697–1764) the distinction between this and the mockery of his 'Modern Life' series was a crucial one. He dissociated himself utterly from caricature. The advertisement to his classiest production, *Marriage à la Mode*, was a series of head studies entitled *Characters and* 54
Caricaturas. In this, a set of 'character' studies after Raphael's tapestry cartoons are opposed to a group of grotesques that one is tempted to describe as caricatures of caricatures. Most telling of all is the artist's arcane allusion in the text below to the preface of Henry Fielding's novel *Joseph Andrews*; for here is written: 'in the Caricatura we allow all licence. Its aim is to exhibit monsters, not men.' There was no place for monsters in Hogarth's art, only for the exposure of human weakness.

For the Romantics, caricature ceased to be a vulgar harmless pleasure; they lived in a world in which the irrational could no longer be discounted. The visions and demons that visited Blake, Fuseli and Goya suggested a new repertoire to the cartoonist, and raised his trade to an art. Never before would one of them have been described as 'the foremost living artist of the whole of Europe' as James Gillray was in 1806.

Gillray (1757–1815) came to his profession with the highest credentials, for he had studied at the Royal Academy Schools. He was the true mock-heroic counterpart to the history painter. His etchings display all the expertise of a first-class draughtsman; they abound too in erudite cultural allusions that would have been appreciated by the fashionable society that



54 HOGARTH *Characters and Caricaturas* 1743

55 GILLRAY *Smelling Out a Rat* 1790

flocked to the shop of his publisher, Mrs Humphreys. In the increasingly troubled political and economic climate of the late eighteenth century the public desire for topical news brought about the emergence of widespread regular journalism; it was Gillray above all who made the political cartoon a distinguished part of this development.

Gillray does not tell his story in crude icons; he evokes a situation. His *Smelling out a Rat* shows Edmund Burke – now a champion against the French Revolution – sniffing out the activities of the notorious radical clergyman Dr Richard Price. Ostensibly the print is against 'the Atheistical-Revolutionist disturbed', but Gillray makes a more complex point in his balancing of observation with invention. For Price's discoverer is reduced to a fantasmagoria of superstition. He emerges absurdly from a cloud – all nose and no head – holding up the tokens of Church and State, and masking himself with his own *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. Gillray had the supreme Romantic gift of extending reality through fantasy. One or other political faction might try to buy his allegiance, but they could never control the range and quality of his imagination.

55

Francisco de Goya

It was a painter – the greatest of the age – who understood most fully the compulsion of such fantasy. For when Francisco de Goya (1746–1828) came to design his satirical *Caprichos* he found himself being drawn from a mockery of Spanish society into a world of inexplicable demons.

Like Blake, Goya is often thought of as an isolated phenomenon; a solitary genius (isolated still more in later years by deafness) in an ailing society. Certainly Spain had long ceased to enjoy the central place in European affairs that it had occupied in the sixteenth century. But although Spain was a backwater, it still felt the eddies of events elsewhere. The ideals of the Enlightenment were no less decisive here than in other outlying regions of European society like Russia. Charles III, under whom Goya grew to maturity, was sympathetic to change, and ministers like Floridablanca put in hand sweeping economic and agricultural reforms.

With the death of Charles III in 1788 and the dismissal of Floridablanca by his successor Charles IV in 1791 this brief moment of progress vanished. It had been, as one Spaniard put it, 'a flash of lightning illuminating us for an instant only to leave us in greater darkness'. Revolution took place in France; the Spanish court watched helplessly. Napoleon first ignored the country, then invaded it; the monarchy capitulated. There was a glorious movement of resistance from the Spanish people, but when the French had finally been expelled its leaders were exiled or executed by a new repressive regime.

The 'flash of lightning' of the 1780s had been enough to make Goya a

confirmed liberal. He was a friend of such progressives as the poet Meléndez Valdés, the translator of the English 'nature' poet Edward Young, and the philosopher and statesman Jovellanos. And when Ferdinand VII suppressed the constitution in 1823, Goya, then seventy-seven, left Spain to spend his last years as an exile in France.

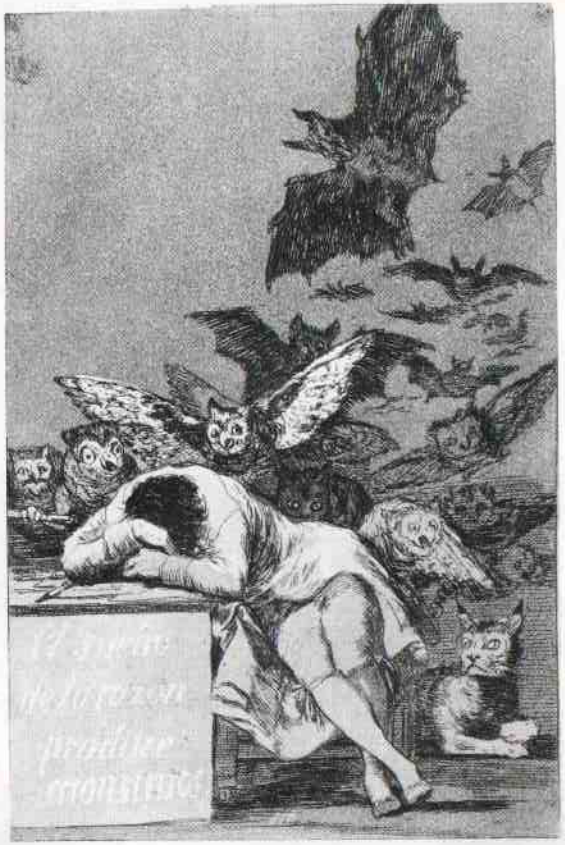
Despite his sympathies, Goya could not ignore the strength of ignorance
56 and superstition in his country. A small panel, the *Flagellants*, echoes the gruesome scenes of religious masochism that still took place in the processions of Holy Week. If one is to believe what Goya wrote, his intention in portraying such irrationalities was to expose them through confrontation. When he sought to address such satires to a wider public by the publication of the *Caprichos*, he advertised the work as an attack on folly and superstition. The plate originally chosen to preface the work was to have carried the explanation: 'The artist dreaming. His only purpose is to banish harmful, vulgar beliefs and to perpetuate in this work of caprices the solid testimony of truth.'

57 The artist improved on this in the published version, entitled *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters*. Now the subtitle reads: 'Imagination abandoned by reason produces impossible monsters; united with her, she is the mother of the arts.' The night creatures that surround Goya are not 'impossible monsters' but owls, bats and a lynx; one, the owl, is actually prompting the artist to action, holding his chalk at the ready for him. It could be taken as the symbol of Athena, goddess of wisdom and the arts. As such it would associate Goya with the long line of intellectual melancholics who discover new truths from the thoughtful contemplation of the unknown. Yet this explanation says nothing of the fear the artist is feeling, or of the unwillingness with which he turns to his task. As the change of subtitle shows, Goya thought up the interpretation of his plates after he had conceived them. Many of the other captions express, as André Malraux put it, 'Goya's astonishment before figures which are partly strangers to him'. He may have set out to mock folly and absurdity, but his imagination took him beyond all control.

Such artistic integrity was perhaps a tribute to the laborious development of his early years. Like Blake and David, he had had to work hard to achieve proficiency. He failed twice to win a scholarship to the Madrid Academy; however he did have the determination to finance himself on a visit to Italy, and the experience seems to have started latent forces developing within him. In any case he appears to have gained the approval of Mengs. For it was this artist who, as principal painter to the Spanish King, was responsible for Goya's employment engagement in 1771 as a designer for the royal tapestries.

58 Goya's tapestry cartoons were painted with a light-toned elegance

56 GOYA *Flagellants* 1794



57 GOYA *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters* c. 1798

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57 GOYA *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters* c. 1798

58 GOYA *Blind Man's Buff* 1789

appropriate to that genre. These conventions he learned from his brother-in-law and former master, Joseph Bayeu, who was also employed on such commissions. Yet at the same time he was learning much from his new surroundings in Madrid. The frescoes painted by Tiepolo and Mengs for Charles III showed him the range and accomplishments of contemporary decorative art from Italy. From the royal collection he could gain a first-hand acquaintance with the great Venetian, Flemish and Spanish painters of the past. He seems to have taken to heart Mengs' assertion that the best school of painting for a young artist was the work of Velazquez, for he made a series of etchings after the works of this master, which were published in Madrid in 1778.

Even in tapestry designs he was able to move gradually away from the conventions of the Rococo. For the Spanish court aped the new French taste for simplicity. In the place of simpering allegories they now preferred scenes of rural life and even of craftsmen at work. They also liked depictions of themselves dressed in the national Spanish costume of the proletarian *majos*

59 GOYA *Duchess of Alba* 1795

and *majas* – a taste comparable to Queen Marie-Antoinette's masquerading
59 as a milkmaid at the French court. Such subjects nurtured Goya's observation.

58 In the late design *Blind Man's Buff* affectation plays a game with the natural. Some of the lords and ladies are in their plebeian guise, but there is no loss of manners. They hold hands neatly in a circle, bobbing away in turn from the blind man's baton – like dancing puppets. If the fluent handling of gauzes and telling touches of pure black remind one of Goya's admiration for the portraits of Velazquez, the changeful light and deep foreground shadows hint at his other hero from the past – Rembrandt. Yet the darkness that creates a unifying mood in Rembrandt's reflective, close-toned pictures seems here to menace the carefree protagonists.

Long before Goya achieved the title of First Painter to the King in 1799, he held the stage as Madrid's most fashionable portraitist. Yet in his pictures of dignitaries about their business, or society ladies in landscapes, there is no less confrontation than in *Blind Man's Buff*. No graceful trees or noble columns
59 offset the dominating presence of the *Duchess of Alba*. As she stands before us with her startling mane of black hair and her outfit of white, red and gold, one feels the full concentration of her elegant and imperious personality. It is not hard to believe the French visitor who declared that 'The Duchess of Alba has not a hair on her head that does not provoke desire.' Surrounding

herself with a bizarre entourage, she lived a life of tempestuous adventures and love-affairs that ended in a mysterious death – possibly from poisoning – at the age of forty.

In this portrait – where the Duchess's commanding gesture presides over nothing more than the ineffectual dog at her feet – Goya can still view this bewitching lady with a certain detachment, and suggest the emotional emptiness that accompanied her quixotic way of life. Yet it was soon to be his turn to kneel to her bidding. In the summer of 1796, when she was recently widowed and he was recovering from the illness that had left him deaf, he joined her at her country estate at Sanlúcar de Barrameda, near Cadiz. A portrait of her from this time shows her in widow's weeds. But the 60
rings on her right hand are inscribed ALBA and GOYA and she points to the ground where SÓLO GOYA – 'only Goya' – is scratched in the sand. Goya's sketchbooks from this visit also contain light-hearted scenes showing the Duchess in a more informal mood, fondling her young Negress ward or 61
flirting with a gentleman on the road. Yet three years later her features were to appear in some of the bitterest plates in the *Caprichos* on themes of fickleness and rejection, with titles like *Dream of Inconstancy*, *They flew away* 62
or *God forgive her: and it was her mother.*

Goya's explorations of a private world had in no way affected his career as a court painter. Yet there is a new frankness in the observation of his later

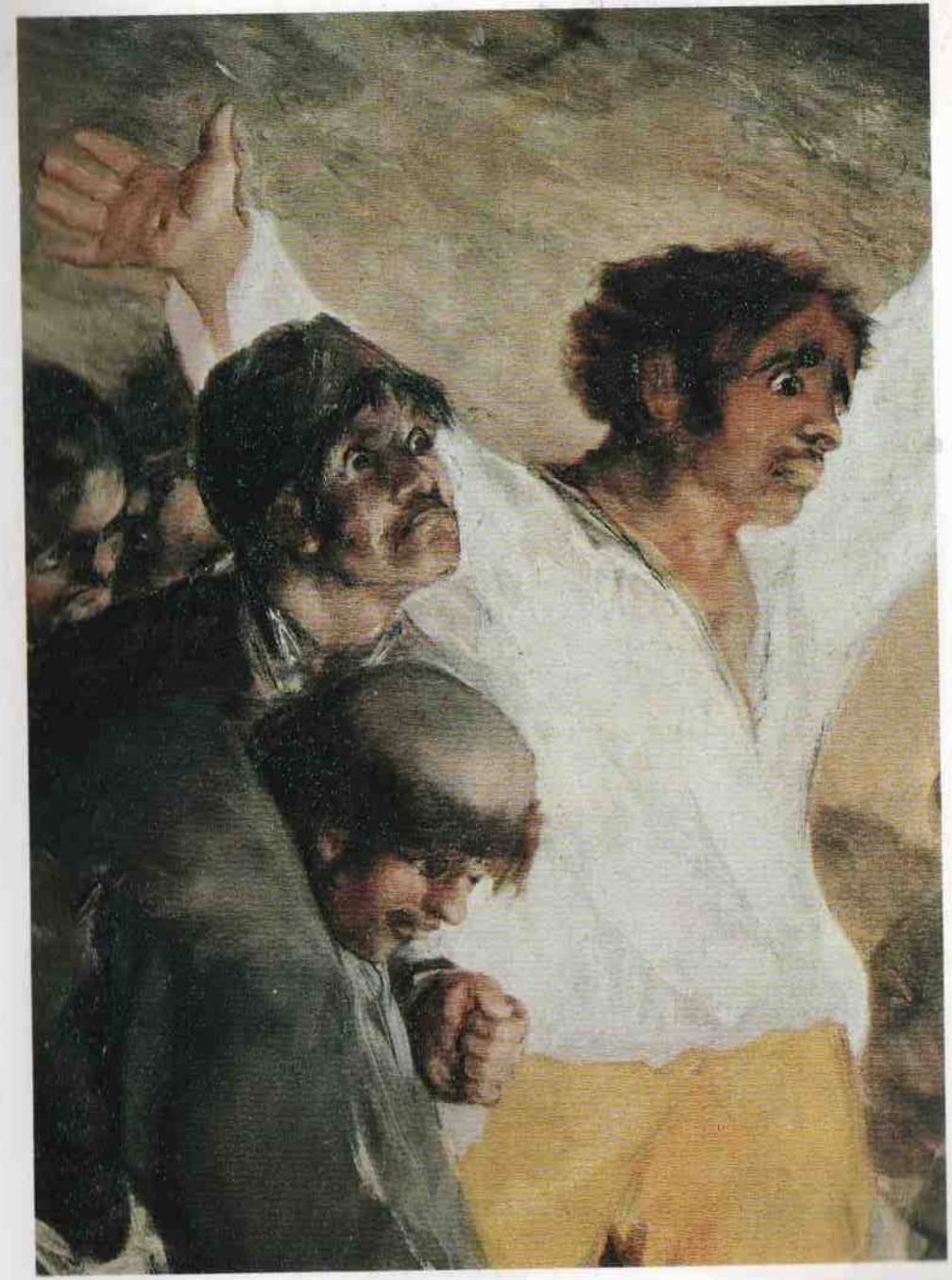
60 GOYA *Duchess of Alba* 1797

61 GOYA *Duchess of Alba with Black Girl* 1796

62 GOYA *Dream of Lying and Inconstancy* c.1799

63 GOYA *Charles IV and the Royal Family* 1800

portraits. Thoughts that were only hinted at when he was painting works like the *Duchess of Alba* now appear in full orchestration. When he painted the neglected wife of the dissolute Prime Minister Godoy, he showed her seated in a darkened room, pregnant and cornered, glancing nervously about her like a fieldmouse. With daring expertise he turned his grandest and most
63 formal commission, the life-size portrait of Charles IV and his family, into an exercise in exposure. There is no difficulty in discovering the bluff stupidity of Charles IV in the decorated plum-coloured figure in the right foreground. Nor is there any thought of concealing the overbearing and licentious character of the Queen as she stands in the centre, casting her unlovely face into half profile for the spectator to get a better look. Near the shadows, clothed in blue, is the viperous Ferdinand, who was ready to unseat his father at the bidding of Napoleon and later became one of Spain's most disastrous rulers. Goya himself has borne witness to what he sees by including himself



64 GOYA *Third of May* (detail) 1814